IT IS A STRANGE HOUSE

DANA BURNET

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IT IS A STRANGE HOUSE

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BY

DANA BURNET

38753

BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
1925

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Published March, 1925

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO
MARGUERITE AND FLAVIA

IT IS A STRANGE HOUSE

ACT ONE

CHARACTERS

LAURA GILDCREST, *A Young Girl*
MRS. GILDCREST, *Her Mother*
ALFRED GILDCREST, *Her Father*
EDWARD UPDIKE, *Laura's Fiance*
JOHN STRESSMAN, *A Poet*
MAID
HOSTESS OF THE RECEPTION ROOM
SELF-MADE MAN
HIS WIFE
A BUM
A WHITE WING
TWO BUSINESS MEN
TWO GIRLS
STREET CAR CONDUCTOR
A PROSTITUTE
A WATCHMAN
CHIEF DEPUTY
YOUNG DEPUTY
A SCRUBWOMAN
A FAT TENOR
A BEGGAR
A MILKMAN
A DRUNKEN GENTLEMAN
A DRUNKEN BUM
PIERRETTE
PIERROT
BOSS OF THE FACTORY ROOM
ATTENDANT
A YOUNG WOMAN FACTORY WORKER
A STUPID COUPLE
A SPINSTER
THE RICHEST MAN IN THE HOUSE
HIS VALET
USHERS IN THE CHAPEL ROOM
A LITTLE BOY
THE VOICE FROM THE HORN
CLUBMAN IN A WINDOW
BELL BOY
FIRST FLAGELLANT
A CREATURE RESEMBLING A MACHINE
FOUR BLIND SINGERS
A DRUNKEN MAN IN RAGS
A DOPE FIEND
A MAD MUSICIAN
A NEGRO
THE MAN WHO ONCE MENDED A ROOF
A POLICEMAN
DOORMAN OF THE BANQUET ROOM
MOTHER AND CHILD
A GARDENER
FLAGELLANTS, GUESTS, FACTORY WORKERS, AMUSEMENT SEEKERS, CHURCH CONGREGATION, BASEMENT PEOPLE

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

ACT I:	*Scene I.*	Laura's Room in the Upper Part of the House. Afternoon.
	Scene II.	The Reception Room. Same Afternoon.
	Scene III.	Same as Scene I. That Afternoon, Later.
	Scene IV.	The Corridor. That Evening
	Scene V.	Stressman's Room, the Garret. That Night.
ACT II:	*Scene I.*	The Corridor. Early Morning.
	Scene II.	The Factory Room. Same Morning.
	Scene III.	The Amusement Room. Saturday Night.
	Scene IV.	Laura's Room in the Lower Part of the House. Sunday Morning.
	Scene V.	The Chapel Room. Later That Morning.
ACT III:	*Scene I.*	The Corridor. Same Morning.
	Scene II.	The Basement. Some Time Later.
	Scene III.	The Corridor Outside the Banquet Room. The Day of the Banquet.
	Scene IV.	The Banquet Room. Immediately Afterward.
	Scene V.	A Garden Outside the House.

"IT IS A STRANGE HOUSE"

ACT ONE

Scene I

A room in the upper part of the house. A large room, coldly designed, expressive of a rigorous formality. Through one of the rear windows strikes a geometrically exact, diagonal shaft of sunlight. There are several entrances, but the dominant door is at the left rear. It has heavy black bars painted across it. Forward at the right is an alcove large enough to hold a dressing table and a chair. About this alcove hangs a curtain of gauze, which gives an illusory vagueness to the figures seen behind it.

Laura is seated at the dressing table, in negligee. An old woman, her maid, is brushing her hair. This goes on for some time.

LAURA (*finally*)

That's enough. I can't stand any more.

MAID (*speaking precisely, in a subdued voice*)

It brings out the gloss, Miss Laura. You'll want the gloss when you're a bride.

LAURA (*rises*)

I tell you I can't stand it.

MAID

Did I hurt you? Did I pull too hard?

LAURA

You didn't hurt — it isn't that. It's the motion.

MAID

The motion —

LAURA

Mechanical. Exactly as if you were a machine.

MAID

That's how we're trained, Miss Laura.

LAURA

Yes — I wonder I haven't noticed it before. Perhaps I have. (*With irritation.*) It's in everything.

MAID

Yes, Miss Laura.

LAURA (*arranging her hair*)

People, too. People going about as if they had clocks ticking inside them. Clockwork!

MAID

It's the rule of the house. Everything in its place and running smoothly. People. Things. The rhythm. You can't break the rhythm.

LAURA (*musingly*)
Why not?

MAID
It wouldn't be right, Miss Laura. It wouldn't be religious.

LAURA
Get me my silver dress and my silver slippers. (*The Maid does so.*) After I'm married I'll wear gold and purple, but now I wear silver to advertise my virginity.
[*She lets fall her dressing gown.*

MAID (*putting the dress on Laura*)
Silver for the virgin, white for the bride,
Scarlet for the woman whose bed is too wide.

LAURA
It's all so frightfully vague — like being tangled in cobwebs.

MAID
Cobwebs, Miss Laura?

LAURA
My virginity, my clothes, my life. This room, this house —

MAID
The house is a strange house, and the people who live in it are guests of an unknown Host.

LAURA

That's only a proverb. If I could find some reality! (*A pause, while the Maid puts on her slippers.*) The other day you mentioned the Basement. Tell me more about it.

MAID

Oh, no, Miss.

LAURA

I want to know. Sometimes one hears the sound, that curious murmur. You used to tell me it was thunder a long way off, or rats in the wall. But I'm not a child any more —

MAID

Excuse me, Miss. I left the Basement as a young girl, and I've never been back into it. All I remember is a kind of smell.

LAURA

You remember all of it, but you won't tell me. (*She catches the Maid by the shoulders.*) I've a good mind to shake you till you do.

MAID

If you shake me my teeth will fall out. Then I'll not be able to tell you anything. Oh, Miss, you can thank the good Host you were born in this room, and not down there, for instance. Horrible! So dark and crawling —

LAURA

The Basement?

MAID

Yes, Miss.

LAURA

I wonder if that would be real —

MAID

Too real. You could never stand it — the smell. You, with your perfumes.

[*She takes a bottle of scent from the dresser.*

LAURA

I like the smell of my own body.

MAID

Oh, Miss Laura.

LAURA

I know, it isn't nice. As my future husband would say, "One prefers the illusion."(*Puts scent on her breast*) Parfum d'amour! It really isn't, you know. It's only crushed rose leaves. Nothing real! I shall have to bathe in rose leaves on my wedding night. Edward has such a delicate nose.

MAID

Miss Laura! You oughtn't to talk like that; it's against the rule.

LAURA

Oh, one says anything to one's old nurse. What am I doing this afternoon?

MAID

Mr. Updike's coming to take you to the reception room.

LAURA

Ah! (*she sighs*) Do I look my usual bored and virginal self?

MAID

You're perfect, Miss Laura.

LAURA

Isn't there a saying that perfection is death? I wonder if one could be dead and not know it! (*Impatiently*) That's all.

MAID

Yes, Miss Laura.

[*She disappears through a door in the wall. Laura parts the gauze curtains and steps down into the room. Her mother, beautifully upholstered in royal purple, enters left.*

LAURA

Good afternoon, Mother.

MRS. GILDCREST

Good afternoon, my dear. Careful how you kiss me — let me look at you.

LAURA (*wheeling mechanically*)
Well?

MRS. GILDCREST
Yes — charming. I'm really quite proud of you, Laura.

LAURA
Are you, Mother?

MRS. GILDCREST
And so relieved. You've no idea what a relief it is to know you're going to be married safely.

LAURA
Have I been such a trial to you?

MRS. GILDCREST
You've worried me. You've worried me always — with your questions!

LAURA
Which you never answered.

MRS. GILDCREST
How could I?

LAURA
But you'd never admit your ignorance, either.

MRS. GILDCREST
I? Ignorant? I know everything that's worth knowing.

LAURA
You know how to dress and how to get your

daughter married. But you don't know what house we're in, or why it was built, or who our Host is.

MRS. GILDCREST

Good heavens! Are you beginning again?

LAURA

The thing that appalls me is that we take so much for granted. We live in our rooms, locked in behind a bolted door, and we don't even wonder about the origin of these walls. As for the foundations, they're unmentionable.

MRS. GILDCREST

My dear Laura, you've been through every schoolroom in the house. How does it happen that you still retain this curious thirst for knowledge?

LAURA

One learns nothing at school. One only becomes educated.

MRS. GILDCREST

You're clever. I wish you weren't. I think you must get it from your father's side of the family.

LAURA (*moving about restlessly*)

Why should we live in these particular rooms?

MRS. GILDCREST

We've always lived here.

LAURA

We don't work. We don't do anything.

MRS. GILDCREST

Of course not. Your father owns shares in the Factory Room.

LAURA

Yes. He got his shares from grandfather, who invented modern plumbing.

MRS. GILDCREST

My dear! We don't speak of that now.

LAURA

No — we live on it. (*Suddenly*) Mother! Have you ever felt that you must find some escape, or go insane?

MRS. GILDCREST

Never! Well, perhaps one does go through a period — I wish you'd stop pacing up and down like a caged animal.

LAURA

That's how I feel. (*Pointing to door, left rear*) It's the door. Those bars. The Unanswerable! If you knew how often I've wanted to break out, to run out into the corridor!

MRS. GILDCREST (*frightened*)

You can't. Those bars are steel. (*She sighs*) I'll be glad when you're married.

LAURA

Do you think I'll be happy with Edward?

MRS. GILDCREST

Why not? He has a better room than this, on a higher level. Edward's an ornament to his class. He represents its highest ideal.

LAURA

What is that ideal?

MRS. GILDCREST

I've forgotten. How stupid of me. But here's your father. Perhaps he— (*Mr. Gildcrest enters*) Alfred, do you remember the definition of the upper-class ideal?

GILDCREST

To be idly decorative; to be decoratively idle. To live without effort, to contribute nothing.

LAURA

Am I to contribute nothing?

GILDCREST

In a sense. Of course. That is —

MRS. GILDCREST

You'll marry and settle down — in Edward's room. You'll have one child — because more

than one is bad for the figure. At forty-five you'll have your face done over. Massage. Hair dye. Dinner. The Play. Religion. Servants. More massage. And once a year you'll attend the banquet given in honor of the Host.

LAURA

At which the Host doesn't appear.

GILDCREST

But he's there, my child, seated behind the curtains of the sacred Ark.

LAURA

Well. And what about Edward?

MRS. GILDCREST

Edward is malleable. You can mold him.

GILDCREST

He's just the husband for you, my dear — though he is a bit of an ass.

MRS. GILDCREST

Your father isn't subtle. I've always said you weren't subtle, Alfred.

GILDCREST

No, my love. If it comes to that, I'm a bit of an ass myself. One is, somehow. If one weren't, one wouldn't get into the best clubs.

[*A confused murmur is heard, like the murmur of a distant sea.*

LAURA

Listen!

MRS. GILDCREST

Disgraceful. It grows louder all the time. In my day, one never heard a sound. Can't something be done about it, Alfred?

GILDCREST

I was talking to one of the Deputies this morning. He agreed that radical steps should be taken. He suggested thickening the walls.

MRS. GILDCREST

An excellent idea.

LAURA

That sound has life in it. (*Turning to them*) Isn't there a legend that some day the Basement people will rise and demand to see the face of the Host?

GILDCREST

My dear — !

MRS. GILDCREST

My dear, one never mentions it! Never!

LAURA

One never mentions anything — interesting. That's why one's mind is such a graveyard.

[*Enter a Manservant in uniform.*

SCENE I : : A ROOM IN THE HOUSE

SERVANT

Mr. Edward Updike

[*Goes out. Edward enters. He is in afternoon dress.*

EDWARD

Good afternoon, Mrs. Gildcrest. Good afternoon, Mr. Gildcrest. (*They shake hands mechanically*) Good afternoon, Laura.

LAURA

Good afternoon, Edward. (*They kiss; Mr. and Mrs. Gildcrest turn their backs*) You have a speck of dust on your sleeve.

EDWARD

I apologize. I must have brushed against that fellow in the corridor.

LAURA

What fellow?

EDWARD

A madman, who goes wandering about — bumping into people and muttering to himself. Are you going to the reception, Mrs. Gildcrest?

MRS. GILDCREST

No. The Play.

GILDCREST

On Wednesday afternoons, one goes to the Play.

EDWARD

Unless one goes to tea.

GILDCREST

Exactly.

LAURA

Let's do something original, for once. Let's go through the House. Start here and go down through the Factory Room, where everything is made. I've never been—

EDWARD

Go through the Factory Room! How frightfully modern!

GILDCREST

Don't tell me my daughter's modern!

MRS. GILDCREST

You'll be asking to see the Basement next.

GILDCREST AND EDWARD (*in horror*)

The Basement!

LAURA (*laughs*)

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to shock you. Besides, I know it's useless.

EDWARD

We'll be late for tea.

GILDCREST

Come, my dear, we'll be late for the Play.

MRS. GILDCREST

One always is.

GILDCREST

Quite so. Au revoir, Edward. Au revoir, my dear.

LAURA

Au revoir.

EDWARD (*bows*)

Au revoir. (*Mr. and Mrs. Gildcrest go out. Edward gives Laura his arm.*) Your perfume. I adore your perfume. It creates an illusion. As if I were engaged to marry a flower! One prefers the illusion.

LAURA

Illusion!

[*They go out.*

CURTAIN

Scene II

The Reception Room. A small room masked by a semicircular curtain. Forward, left, is a kind of throne chair in which sits the Hostess. The dominant color note is pink.

The room has in it Eight People beautifully groomed and painted. They stand facing each other and talk rapidly, the effect being that of a rhythmic murmur, a sound like wind on dry leaves. No words are distinguishable.

The Hostess taps with her lorgnette. All bow and change partners. This time the speeches are said singly. They have the chief characteristic of small talk; that is, elegance without meaning.

First Couple

MAN

Money being something gathered yellow, love has no beans. Elevators for skyrockets and the jazz is prime.

WOMAN

Pekinese wearing pearls but no perambulators. Silver slippers blossom and there are seven mud puddles. Ladies at tea not being horrible with legs.

Second Couple

MAN

Agitators going purple and the jails swallowing many Christs. Nothing being nothing, the bonds are safe.

WOMAN

Cooks for ciphers and the key is lost. I am for passion, a radio and six white horses on a screen. Mince pies have no children.

Third Couple

MAN

How do you like your shadows wearing collars or with saxophones. Wine sings and the woman is breakable.

WOMAN

Boudoir golf-sticks stock-market firm tone electrons preferred. Let us pray.

Fourth Couple

MAN

I have a riddle — why is a rat riding on a street car being tortured with bells?

WOMAN

Bankers for toe dancers and the house turns

over. Life is fresh paint, the slapstick falls, the door is blue. There are no eggs.

[*Edward and Laura enter. They take their places at the end of the line.*

EDWARD (*promptly*)

The illusion is everything. Everything is illusion and the Best People.

LAURA (*a bit wearily*)

Rose leaves for bread and the aristocracy runs over. I adore Beethoven, caviar and yellow canaries that sing.

[*Immediately a concealed Orchestra plays Jazz, faintly. The company dances a stylized one-step.*

There is a loud knocking. Two servants in livery are seen defending an entrance right. Voices raised in protest, in consternation. The music stops. A half-naked man bursts into the room. He drags by the hand a tawdry, overdressed woman.

MAN (*pushing aside the two servants*)

There, by the Holy Host himself, I promised I'd show 'em to you, and here they are. Look at 'em!

[*He laughs. The crowd draws back, with exclamations of disgust.*

HOSTESS (*to servant*)

Who are these outrageous people?

SERVANT

Beg pardon, ma'am —

MAN

Never mind, you! (*To Hostess*) I'll answer that question. I'm a self-made man. I've fought my way up from the Basement —

ALL (*in horror*)

The Basement!

MAN

Yes, and I've brought her with me. My wife, ladies and gentlemen! My lawful wedded wife. (*He laughs*) All alone, y' understand. Me! My own strength. (*Slaps his bare chest*) In here. The thing y' can't beat, the thing y' can't keep down. The weak ones, they die. Me, I climb over 'em. Their bodies make a ladder, make steps. I climb up — up, and when I get tired *she* pushes me on.

THE WOMAN — HIS WIFE (*pointing*)

I want a hat like hers.

MAN

I'll buy you all the hats in the house. (*Laughs*) She wants clothes. My lawful wedded wife wants clothes — clothes — clothes —

HOSTESS

Her instinct is understandable. Much more so than your own.

MAN

Bah! I ain't ashamed of my nakedness. (*Slaps himself*) Self-made man! Hair on my chest. Proud of it. (*Looks around, cringing a little*) God, you're like a lot o' wax dummies. I could dress myself in bank-notes if I wanted to!

HOSTESS

You have money?

MAN

Money? Ha, ha! Listen. Every time I put my foot on a corpse, I put my hand in his pocket. The weak ones, the little ones, they don't have much. But every little bit helps, eh? And there were millions of them.

THE COMPANY

Millions! He's got millions.

[*They press forward.*

MAN (*to his wife*)

Let's get out of this, I'm scared.

THE WOMAN

I want a dress like hers.

HOSTESS (*descending*)

Don't be frightened. As every one knows, ours

is a democratic society. The fact that you, by your own efforts, have reached this room proves that fact. But, of course, you must be clothed.

[*She motions to the two servants.*

THE WOMAN

I want jewels like hers.

HOSTESS

If you will follow the attendants they will provide you with a suitable wardrobe, suitable manners, and a suitable ancestry. When you have become respectable, and have memorized your small talk, you may return and take your places in the line. Au revoir.

[*Resumes her place.*

SERVANT

This way, sir.

MAN

I'd rather go back to robbing corpses —

WOMAN

No. I want —

[*They go out.*

The Hostess taps with her lorgnette. The line forms. This time Laura and Edward are the second couple.

FIRST COUPLE

Money being something gathered yellow, Love has no beans.

EDWARD

The illusion is everything, everything is illusion and a Democracy with reservations.

LAURA

Rose leaves for bread — rose leaves — (*She hesitates*) I've forgotten it. I've forgotten my small talk.

EDWARD

My dear!

LAURA

I can't — go on —

FIRST MAN

This is dreadful. She's forgotten her small talk.

VOICES

Forgotten. What a disgrace. Shameful — not the proper schooling.

LAURA

Take me home. Please!

EDWARD

Yes, I think we'd better go. Good afternoon.

VOICES

Good afternoon. [*Edward and Laura bow to Hostess, to the company. They go out, hurriedly.*

SCENE II : : THE RECEPTION ROOM

HOSTESS

Laura Gildcrest forgetting her small talk!
What's the House coming to?
[*The chatter, the wind of voices begins again.*

CURTAIN

Scene III

Same as Scene I.
AT RISE: Laura and Edward.

LAURA
I'm sorry. I don't know how I happened to forget.

EDWARD
That scene. Those people! They upset you.

LAURA (*vaguely*)
What people — ? Oh — yes!

EDWARD
Did you — notice the odor?

LAURA
Yes!

EDWARD
Shocking. And fancy showing one's body like that. Talking about it, too. Actually bragging about — Hmm! I daresay he was frightfully virile, and all that, but — well — (*Resignedly*) That's what comes of living in the democratic wing!

LAURA (*impetuously, in a strong voice*)
I don't know what's the matter with me.
[*Moves about the room.*

EDWARD

The weather. It's been unusually warm lately. Do you think it's the weather?

LAURA

Perhaps. Yes, it is warm. Would you mind opening the window?

EDWARD

I'll open it for a moment.

[*He does so. A voice comes in.*

THE VOICE

You are the storm and the passion,
You are the attack, the impregnation,
The lightning is gathered into your bodies, and the fire-bolts are hurled from your bodies pointed like towers —

LAURA

Who's that?

EDWARD (*looking out*)

The fellow, the madman. The one I told you about. The fellow who brushed my sleeve.

LAURA

Who is he?

EDWARD

A sort of poet, I believe. Not a respectable poet. Not respectable at all.

LAURA

How do you know?

EDWARD

If he were respectable he'd sell his poetry instead of chanting it through the corridor. Come away, my dear. He'll see you looking out.

LAURA

I should like him to.

EDWARD

What? Nonsense. I'll close the window.

THE VOICE (*heard vaguely*)

You are the new rhythm beating against the old —

LAURA

Queer. His voice is like all the sounds that come through the walls and through the floor. It has in it — the heart-beat.

EDWARD

The heart-beat?

LAURA

Machinery. Huge wheels turning and turning. Engines throbbing. Iron and steam, flesh and blood. The murmur of the Basement. All one thing, a new thing — like songs coming out of a furnace. Like music coming from hammers

beating on steel, or from human nerves pulled tight like fiddle strings —

EDWARD

I must insist that you let me close the window.

[*Does so.*

LAURA

Yes, close it! Lock it. That's what you'll always do. Only you must be careful that some day you don't lock out my soul.

[*She laughs.*

Enter Mr. and Mrs. Gildcrest.

MRS. GILDCREST (*to Laura, as Alfred and Edward shake hands*)

Ah, my dear. You're home before us.

LAURA

I wasn't feeling well. How was the Play?

MRS. GILDCREST

Most disturbing. It had a new ending.

EDWARD

A new ending?

GILDCREST

Yes. Extraordinary.

MRS. GILDCREST

I call it revolutionary.

[*Laura goes to window.*

EDWARD

What happened?

GILDCREST

Well, you know, the play always has ended in one way, that's when the hero says, "Love is the greatest thing in the world!" Curtain. Always that.

EDWARD

Yes, always that.

GILDCREST

Well! This afternoon it was the heroine who said, "Love is the greatest thing in the world!"

EDWARD

No, really? The heroine?

MRS. GILDCREST

Yes. Pure feminism.

EDWARD

I'm sure I don't know what the stage is coming to.

MRS. GILDCREST

No respect for tradition.

GILDCREST

I shall write a letter to the newspapers, protesting against the Decline of the Drama. Come, my love.

MRS. GILDCREST

You must excuse us. Alfred is greatly excited. He's been seeing the same play for forty years, and now to think they've changed it — !

GILDCREST (*already in the throes of composition*)

This passion for innovation must be stopped — (*To his wife*) Do you think I might say this perverted passion, my love — ?

MRS. GILDCREST (*as they go out*)

I think the word passion is sufficient.

[*Exit.*

EDWARD

It is upsetting. Everything nowadays seems to be going strange and new —

LAURA (*turning suddenly*)

I should like to see you naked!

EDWARD

Laura!

LAURA

Only to the waist.

[*She laughs wildly. The voice is near, muffled.*

EDWARD

Laura!

LAURA

I can't go on. (*Hurriedly*) I can't go through with it.

EDWARD

What do you mean?

LAURA

Our engagement. Our marriage.

EDWARD

Not go through with our marriage?

LAURA

I can't stand it, I tell you. The thought of it — ! Oh, it's like a nightmare. This horrible fear! I'm being shut in, smothered. You're all trying to smother me —

EDWARD

I don't understand.

LAURA

How can you want me when you know I dread the thought — ?

EDWARD

You're beautiful, I love you. And you love me. You must. I have such an excellent room.

LAURA

Your room! I should stifle there. I want to go through all the rooms.

EDWARD

But that isn't done.

LAURA

I shall do it. This house, how deep down does it go? I must find out. How tall is it? I must —

EDWARD

Laura, my dear, you aren't well. You're out of your mind.

LAURA

And if I am — ? I'm still young, I still have my body! What's the body for if not to discover life?

EDWARD

But one must preserve the illusion, the dream.

LAURA

No! Not illusion. Not dreams! (*The voice is heard*) Oh, that voice. Music! People marching. Machines marching. Drums beating. War — and war! And out of all the sound of it somehow my heart getting its flower. (*She takes his sleeve*) Go with me through the house and I —

EDWARD

It isn't done.

LAURA (*quietly*)

Then I must go alone.

[*She walks toward door.*

EDWARD

The door's barred. You can't —

LAURA

No. Look. (*She touches it*) Paper! It's — paper. I've never really looked at it before. (*Wonderingly*) Only — pretense! Illusion!

[*She tears the paper with her hands; steps back, afraid. The light is strong in the corridor; the room grows dim.*

THE VOICE (*heard chanting*)

You are the seed fallen out of stranger stars,
Blow, blow the wind and let the seed be fertile in the ground,
Let walls be broken, and the house be overthrown —

[*Laura moves toward the broken door.*

EDWARD

Stop! Laura —

[*Enter Mr. and Mrs. Gildcrest.*

MRS. GILDCREST

What is it?

EDWARD (*pointing*)

The door!

GILDCREST

The door —

[*The room is very dim.*

LAURA (*looking out*)

I don't see him. I hear his voice but — (*To them*) Is nothing real? Have you killed it all with your illusions? Yourselves, too? (*She laughs*) Yes, that's funny! You, too! All of you. Illusions!

MRS. GILDCREST

Laura! My daughter —

LAURA

What house do we live in? Who is the Host? Who are you?

MRS. GILDCREST

Your mother.

GILDCREST

Your father.

EDWARD

Your future husband.

LAURA

No. You're only ghosts that torture me. Who lives? (*Shouting*) Who lives? (*The Poet, Stressman, passes. The light reveals his face*) You! And they — the ones who march.

[*She goes out into the corridor.*

MRS. GILDCREST (*speaking with an effort, as if in a dream*)

Gone. Laura, my daughter — (*To Gildcrest*)

You're her father. Why don't you — go and — bring her back?

GILDCREST

It's no use. She's found us out.

EDWARD

Needless to say, my engagement to your daughter is at an end.

[*He bows and goes out, right.*

MRS. GILDCREST

Alfred — ?

GILDCREST

Yes, my love?

MRS. GILDCREST

I wish — I knew how to cry.

CURTAIN

Scene IV

The corridor. A square, open space enclosed on three sides by a gradually mounting staircase. Beyond the stairs a black curtain. An archway, center rear, supports a raised landing.

There is a light on the landing and a lamp-post forward, right.

The rest of the playing space is veiled in a greenish dusk.

A bum dressed like a comedian in a burlesque show stands leaning against the lamp-post.

BUM

Beauty. Beauty in everything. To live, to observe, to find — beauty! My physical being insists upon food. Ham — and eggs. A doughnut. Coffee. No, no! I will not be carnal. To eat is to work and to work is to desecrate the mind. I have the Greek mind. If necessary I'll steal a watch or a pocketbook and preserve my integrity of intellect. Oh, my stomach! How it growls at me. Doughnuts and coffee. Beauty in everything! (*Enter a White Wing, pushing his dust-cart*) Behold the White Wing, the ultimate realist, sweeping up the dung of Day!

WHITE WING

I'll sweep you up one of these days, y' bum, y'.
[*Goes out, right.*

BUM

Beauty, beauty in everything! But not in doughnuts. Not in two doughnuts — !
[*Enter two Business Men; walking rapidly, talking with gestures.*

FIRST BUSINESS MAN

Hunnerd thousand dollars, make good or get out. Overhead expenses, thirty per cent profit, the wife wants a fur coat. Wages 've gotta come down.

SECOND BUSINESS MAN

Boost — don't knock! Tear down things what da ya give us in their place? Go to church, read the magazines, play golf, worship the Host, don't say y' saw me with the little manicure girl, d' ja ever hear the one about the naked woman?
[*They go out.*

BUM

Degenerate age. Sex talk, secondary excitement, love by suggestion, mental passion. Infidelity in books, literature instead of life.

Repression, prevention. Oh, my stomach! Ham and eggs. Beauty —

[*A street car passes. A small, flat car crowded with people hanging to straps. It goes clanging across the stage, carrying its own light. The faces revealed are queer, distorted, fixed and pale.*

VOICE OF CONDUCTOR

Kindly move up to the fronna the car. Plennya room in the fronna the car.

BUM

Progress, progress. The beauty of progress.

[*Two Girls pass.*

FIRST GIRL

Honest to Gawd, pink silk drawers, I says it ain't re-fined, gimme sompen that shows, like rhinestones or —

SECOND GIRL

An' I says to him, I says, " Y' needn't start jazzin' me," I says, " whataya think I yam," an' he says, honest, he says, " Say, lissen, I diden mean it that way," he says, " I wanna marry y' — " " My Gawd," I says —

[*They go out.*

A Prostitute comes through the archway, rear.

PROSTITUTE

Hullo, dearie.

BUM

Go away. There's no beauty in you.

PROSTITUTE

Oh, yes, there is, only you can't afford it. Ha, ha! Imagine me tryin' t' brace a funny mug like you! Where'd 'ja come from — a circus?

BUM

I am a part of the Greatest Show on Earth — a part of the Grand Burlesque — and so are you. In fact, you and I are fellow players.

PROSTITUTE (*uneasily*)

I don't getcha.

BUM

Look at me. Don't you recognize me? We've played together so many times, you and I. Mostly in the street scenes. The Prostitute —

PROSTITUTE

And the Bum! Yeah! (*Puts her hand to her eyes*) How does it go — ?

BUM (*reciting*)

We are the disinherited, the wastage of a world. Whatever's to be said too sharp and keen, too bitter-real for decent mouths, that is our utterance. Come, let us make some comment, leave some sting upon the air, so they

who are respectable shall know by what despair their fine estate is bought —

PROSTITUTE

Give us this day our daily bread.

BUM

Not bread, but justice! Use us once correctly, in our own true likenesses, not as mere derisive horns to blare and bleat against the heedless world. I am a man for all my hunger! And you, a woman, though you drag the virgin dream, that should be in your robe, like a spoiled finery through the mud —

PROSTITUTE

Stop, stop! I'm afraid — you're going out of your part.

[*She sits down on the steps.*

BUM

My stomach! Beauty in everything. Doughnuts.

[*Enter a Watchman in uniform.*

WATCHMAN

Move on, you!

BUM

Move on, let all the hungry hearts move on! This is no place for poetry.

[*He goes out.*

WATCHMAN (*to Prostitute*)

Come on, y' tart, y' ! Whataya doin', sittin' there — ? Beat it!

PROSTITUTE

Ah! (*Springs up, walks rapidly away. Watchman goes out — left.*

Enter Laura right. She and the Prostitute meet under the lamp-post) Huh!

LAURA

Could you tell me — ?

PROSTITUTE

What?

LAURA

Have you seen him? A man — a young man going about talking to himself — ?

PROSTITUTE

Huh? Talkin' to himself? A man — ?

LAURA

A poet!

PROSTITUTE (*looks at Laura*)

No. And if I had — Say, lissen, dearie! Take a tip from me. Don't have nothin' to do with no poet. See?

LAURA

Why not?

PROSTITUTE

Because when he's cold he'll take the fine white flesh off your back and put it on his own, and when he's tired he'll crawl into your heart and lie there so you can't move with the weight of him.

LAURA

I don't know. I'm strong!

PROSTITUTE

Strong — ? Huh! Don't go chasin' after no poet. I knew one once — I used to play with him in a kind of play that went on — Ha, ha! He could say beautiful things, God damn him! Strong? No, there ain't none of us strong enough to stand up against the Joke!

LAURA

What do you mean by the Joke?

PROSTITUTE

Why, it's plain enough. Do you know what house you're in?

LAURA

No.

PROSTITUTE

Do you know who the Host is?

LAURA

No.

PROSTITUTE

D'ja ever see him?

LAURA

No one's ever seen him.

PROSTITUTE

Well, ain't that a joke? And say — Wouldn't it be the biggest joke of all if there wasn't no Host?

LAURA

But there is! There must be!

PROSTITUTE

That's what you say. But the way I got it figgered out — Come over here where it's dark. If that damn watchman sees me, he'll tell me to go along.

LAURA

Why?

PROSTITUTE

Oh, just because he's a watchman.

[She draws Laura into the shadow of the steps. Enter Two Deputies in clerical garments. One is elderly and of commanding appearance. The other is quite young.

CHIEF DEPUTY

As Chief Deputy of the Host, and the spiritual head of this house, I tell you to beware of intellect, my son.

YOUNG DEPUTY

But, sir, it seems to me that we must reconcile religion with intelligence.

CHIEF DEPUTY

Not at all, not at all. We must reconcile it only with what's popular. For instance, money. Why is the Church at present in such a strong position? Because we've included in our service the popular ceremony of putting money in the bank.

YOUNG DEPUTY

But saving money is one of the cardinal virtues. The theologians have proved it!

CHIEF DEPUTY

Quite so, my son.

[*A procession of white-robed figures appears on the steps. The figures descend, carrying lanterns and beating themselves rhythmically with whips. They are led by a man bearing a cross.*

YOUNG DEPUTY (*pointing*)

There, sir! Look there. That's what comes of letting religion go to pot.

CHIEF DEPUTY

Yes, this last straggling remnant of Christianity is rather a nuisance. Still, we must be tolerant.

YOUNG DEPUTY

We ought to suppress them.

THE FLAGELLANTS (*chanting*)

The beauty of suffering! The beauty of wounds!

[*They go out, chanting.*

CHIEF DEPUTY

Well, at least, they're picturesque. They have a sense of the dramatic. That's the trouble with intelligence, my boy. It's never dramatic.

YOUNG DEPUTY

It might be, sir, if you'd consent to my plan.

CHIEF DEPUTY

Oh, you've got a plan! What is it?

YOUNG DEPUTY

I've been thinking of it a long time, sir. It's this. On the next Banquet Day, I strongly urge that you, as the head of the church, mount the steps, tear aside the curtains of the Sacred Ark and reveal the Host!

CHIEF DEPUTY (*in a strong voice*)

Hush! Are you mad? (*More quietly*) My dear boy, I'm very fond of you, in spite of your intellect. But if I ever hear you mention again such a thing as revealing the Host, I shall

deprive you of your Deputy's robe and of the salary that goes with it.

YOUNG DEPUTY

I must think this over.

CHIEF DEPUTY

Do.

YOUNG DEPUTY (*greatly distressed*)

I — I don't want to lose my robe! But — my conscience, sir — !

[*He turns and goes out abruptly.*

CHIEF DEPUTY (*to himself*)

I trust his attack of conscience won't be serious.

LAURA (*from the shadow*)

No, no! I don't believe — (*She comes forward quickly; to Chief Deputy*) Is it true?

CHIEF DEPUTY

Hello, what's this? What is it, young woman?

LAURA

I was talking to a girl — back there, by the steps — and she said something I can't believe.

CHIEF DEPUTY

Well?

LAURA

She said that nothing happens for any reason. That it's all a kind of show that goes on — a grand burlesque —

CHIEF DEPUTY

Blasphemy! (*The Prostitute laughs shrilly from the shadow*) Silence! (*Prostitute goes out*) You know better than that. You seem a well-bred young woman. Aren't you Laura Gildcrest?

LAURA

It doesn't matter who I am. You're the Chief Deputy. Tell me the truth. Is it a burlesque?

CHIEF DEPUTY

Life is real, life is earnest. Nothing happens except by the will of the Host.

[*Enter a Fat Man, followed by the Bum.*

LAURA

Then it isn't just — accident?

CHIEF DEPUTY

Never.

[*The Bum steals the Fat Man's pocketbook.*

LAURA

Look! That man's being robbed.

CHIEF DEPUTY

Ah! Precisely! An excellent example of my thesis. If you will observe — ? There, you see, the thief is going to escape, apparently without paying for his crime. No, he isn't going to escape! (*As Watchman enters*) There's the watchman just in time to catch the thief.

Could anything be more obviously divine? Watch!

WATCHMAN

Stop, thief! Or I'll shoot!

BUM

My stomach. I must eat!

[*He runs away. The Watchman draws a revolver and fires. The shot makes no noise but a flame leaps out of the muzzle of the revolver and the Bum falls.*

LAURA

Oh!

WATCHMAN

Dead. Good riddance. (*Takes pocketbook from the Bum's hand*) Hey, Mister! Here's your pocketbook!

[*Goes out after Fat Man.*

CHIEF DEPUTY

You see?

LAURA

Dead! Do you mean the Host knew — wanted this man killed — for a pocketbook — ?

CHIEF DEPUTY

That's exactly what I do mean. And now that I've explained everything, my dear, you must excuse me. It's almost dinner time and I'm

having lamb kidneys to-night. I'm very fond of lamb kidneys. Besides I've been arguing steadily since noon. These are garrulous days. (*Looks at his watch*) It is late. You'd better go to your room, my dear. I know you have an excellent one.

[*He goes out.*

Enter Stressman.

STRESSMAN

You are the storm and the seed,
You are that which presses outward against all building and all confinement,
You are death and chaos,
And that which comes out of chaos is in you,
Vastly creative —

LAURA (*approaching him as he goes toward the steps*)

Please — !

[*He stands looking at her a long time. The light is on their faces.*

STRESSMAN

What do you want of me?

LAURA

I don't know. Some way of escape! Some truth.

STRESSMAN

Truth! A catchword for fools! (*Again he looks at her*) You want to press your face on my brain.

LAURA

No, I —

STRESSMAN

Thanks. I don't need a woman to-night.

[*He goes up the stairs.*

LAURA

Oh, how could you — ! (*He disappears behind the curtain on the landing, above*) You must — ! Please! Wait — ! You must — !

[*She follows him; likewise disappears.*

Enter the White Wing.

WHITE WING (*to himself as he sweeps up*)

I been a good provider, ain't I — ? I'm as good as most husbands and better than some. Ah, ha! What's this? (*Stoops over body of the Bum*) Oh, it's you, is it? Called me a realist, did y' ? I told y' I'd sweep y' up one o' these days. (*Picks body up and dumps it in rubbish cart*) Y' bum, y'!

[*Starts out, left.*

BUM

Beauty — beauty in everything!

WHITE WING

Gawd! I thought y' was dead.

BUM

How absurd! When you know I've got to go on playing the scene.

[*The Street Car passes as before.*

VOICE OF CONDUCTOR

Kindly move up to the fronna the car. Plennya room in the fronna the car. Kindly move up to the fronna the car.

[*The face of the Conductor is a skeleton's face.*

CURTAIN

Scene V

Stressman's Room, the garret. A small, low-ceilinged room with a hazy back wall. A table and two chairs. A couch. Forward left, a crude-looking musical instrument, half harp, half piano. A light over it. Stressman stands by the open door, right rear, listening to the murmur that comes up the stairs.

STRESSMAN

What stuff for singing, for making into songs! Throw out all the old stuff, all the pretty sounds, the soft stuff. Take this. This is at the bottom of it all. Music — more than fountains spouting silver in moonlight. Poetry more than striking words together, words like glass to tinkle when the wind blows. Music and poetry one thing! That thing the rule of the house, the rhythm. The new rhythm! Who wants the old thing. I'm his enemy! (*Turns — faces the audience*) Oh, you satisfied, you blindly contented, I'll enter the foundations of your house and shake them. I'll make a new vibration in the walls of your house! I'm your enemy, and the friend of your children, the friend of your souls — ! (*He stands*

silent a moment; then walks somberly to instrument; begins to play. A strange music comes out. He mumbles along with it, sometimes speaking aloud) The new thing. No, no. It must be simple, simple! Make them laugh; there may be a way through laughter. Who are you, coming into it? Who are you? — *(Laura enters from door rear. He stops playing, looks around. A pause)* You — ! *(Brushing his eyes with his hand)* What are you doing here?

LAURA

I followed you up the stairs. Your door was open. I came in.

STRESSMAN

Why?

LAURA

I don't know.

STRESSMAN

Who are you?

LAURA

I —

STRESSMAN

No. Don't explain. I don't care who you are. I can't be bothered. You must go away.

LAURA

I'm Laura Gildcrest. I had one of the best

rooms in the house. I heard you — your voice — in the corridor. I opened the door in the wall. No, in my own mind —

STRESSMAN (*impatiently*)

Yes, but why, why do you come here — ?

LAURA

Why do you go chanting your poems through the corridor?

STRESSMAN

You're right. Why does one do anything! (*Sits down, takes his head in his hands*) Poems, no! I wasn't chanting poems! Do you hear that sound coming up the stairs?

LAURA

Yes.

STRESSMAN

You know what it is?

LAURA

The Basement.

STRESSMAN (*getting up and walking about*)

I'm trying to get it, work it up — ! (*Faces her*) Tell me, why do all my rhythms go back to that sound like the branches of a tree returning to the trunk of the tree? Why do I hear in that sound a great unquarried song that tortures me to realize it?

LAURA

I can't answer your questions. I can only ask more. My own —

STRESSMAN

Well. What do you want to know?

LAURA

I want to know the house I live in.

STRESSMAN

That's simple enough. Start here, go down these stairs till you come to the Basement —

LAURA

Experience doesn't mean anything unless you're in the mood for it. I'm not ready to go into the Basement. (*Laughs*) I'm still too respectable.

STRESSMAN

You seem to be very intelligent for a woman.

LAURA

Don't you think women are intelligent?

STRESSMAN

It's the fashion to think so. I must say I know very little about it. I've not had much to do with women. (*Scratching his head*) What I do know about them isn't interesting. They're all looking for one thing, apparently.

LAURA

What?

STRESSMAN

Sex experience. Marriage of one sort or another. Love, if you like the word.

LAURA

I wonder —

STRESSMAN (*drily*)

If that's what you're looking for? Probably it is.

LAURA

Well — at least — it's more decent this way than — (*Pause*) I was engaged to a man who meant nothing to me. He meant less than — than your voice coming in at the window —

STRESSMAN

Good God! Are you in love with me?

LAURA

Oh, no! The thing that drew me to you was much stronger. It was like a magnet —

STRESSMAN (*crooking his finger at her*)

Love! The beginnings of love. That's what it was!

LAURA

Do you think so?

STRESSMAN

There's not a doubt of it. (*Greatly disturbed*) Well, you may as well be sensible about it and go away at once.

LAURA (*calmly*)
If it is love — why should I go?

STRESSMAN
My God! You can't stay here. And yet — (*Almost angrily*) I want you to stay.

LAURA
Do you?

STRESSMAN
Yes, I do.

LAURA (*smiling*)
And I don't even know your name.

STRESSMAN
John Stressman.

LAURA
John Stressman. (*Quietly*) Now I've always known it.

STRESSMAN
Always? Why should you say that? We're strangers.

LAURA
Yes. (*Looks about*) Is this your room?

STRESSMAN (*nods*)
In the garret.

LAURA
Where all poets live!

STRESSMAN

Don't call me a poet. I'm not good enough for that — nor bad enough! I'm — nothing!

LAURA

A poet — (*Her glance wanders*) It's a pleasant room. Rather thrilling, somehow.

STRESSMAN

There's a window.

LAURA

A window?

STRESSMAN

Sometimes.

LAURA

Not always?

STRESSMAN

No, not always. But when everything's going beautifully, something happens and my room becomes a tower, with a great window — here! Looking out on —

LAURA

What?

STRESSMAN

A garden.

LAURA

I should like to be here when that happened.

STRESSMAN

It won't happen now.

LAURA

Because of me?

STRESSMAN

No. Because I'm impotent!

[*He strikes a futile chord on the instrument.*

LAURA

What's that?

STRESSMAN

A thing for music. I made it.

LAURA

A thing for music —

STRESSMAN

Yes. Each string represents a different shade of color in the sound. But it's no good. There's a finer instrument than this I must get hold of — Much finer, much bigger —

LAURA

What instrument is that?

STRESSMAN

The crowd — the people themselves, the Basement people! They'll be my orchestra. Living throats, mouths, lungs — ! Inarticulate now! Only a murmur. But I'll give them words, I'll give them the song —

LAURA

What song?

STRESSMAN

The new one. The new rhythm that will break down and destroy the old —

LAURA

But that — but then the house will fall!

STRESSMAN (*indifferently*)

Let it fall. (*Has seated himself at keyboard*) It's all a matter of vibration. Sometimes when I'm playing, the walls of this room melt like mist. Then the window, and the garden — [*He plays.*

LAURA

Don't! I'm afraid.

STRESSMAN

You needn't be. I haven't got it yet. (*Looking around*) Why should you be afraid? You're a part of the change.

LAURA

Yes, but I'm still — I'm still a guest of the Unknown Host.

STRESSMAN

Some day he'll be known. Some day when my song's made them not afraid, they'll walk up

to his holy hiding place and have his face out fair in the light.

LAURA

Will that be such a victory?

STRESSMAN

Yes. Because it all goes back to him. That one, with his mystery!

LAURA

There must always be some one. Perhaps, if you lead them to victory, they'll make *you* their Host. Is that what you want — ?

STRESSMAN

No! Not that!

LAURA

What, then?

STRESSMAN

I've no ambition, do you understand? None.

LAURA

Why? If you bring about this victory — ?

STRESSMAN

No more questions! Why, why, why! There's no reason for anything. There's only a purpose creating, moving, pushing forward this flesh it finds always useful, always futile. (*Pause*) You'll find knowledge, if you look for

it; you'll also find that life lies always a little beyond the facts —

LAURA

Well, at any rate, I know I'm alive. I was never quite sure of it — down there, in my father's room —

STRESSMAN

That's why you ran away.

LAURA

I had to — or go mad!

STRESSMAN

Yes. Madness is a sort of escape.

LAURA

Not the only one, surely!

STRESSMAN

How are you going to get on? Have you money?

LAURA

Only a little in my purse.

STRESSMAN

You'll have to go to work, then.

LAURA

I mean to work. I mean to go into the Factory Room and —

STRESSMAN

Have you ever been in the Factory Room?

LAURA

No, but —

STRESSMAN

I have. I work there when I have to choose between that and starving. I've got to start in again pretty soon —

LAURA

Perhaps we'll meet there.

[*She starts toward door.*

STRESSMAN

Where are you going to sleep to-night?

LAURA

I don't know. On the stairs. In the corridor —

STRESSMAN

You can stay here if you like. (*As she looks at him*) You'll be perfectly safe.

LAURA (*smiles*)

I'm not sure that I care about being safe.

STRESSMAN

What!

LAURA

Are you shocked? I only said what was in my mind.

STRESSMAN (*staring at her*)

Oh, God! You are going to haunt me, I can see that. You're going to haunt me!

LAURA

I'm sorry. I *will* go.

STRESSMAN

No, don't. (*Takes her hand*) Laura—

LAURA

John Stressman. (*A pause*) I wish I might be a part of your song!

STRESSMAN

You must stay, now.

LAURA

I will — and please be kind to me! I'm very tired — and maybe — a little frightened —

STRESSMAN (*gruffly*)

Go lie down on the couch. (*She does so. He covers her with an overcoat*) Pleasant dreams.

LAURA

It must be — a marching song!

STRESSMAN

Yes, by God —!

[*He sits down at the instrument and begins to play very softly. An indefinite window appears in the rear wall, grown hazy. Through this window is seen vaguely a single gnarled and drooping tree.*

CURTAIN

ACT TWO

Scene I

The Corridor. Early morning. Lyric mood. The stairs show as before. Above, to the right, an unrelated window of formal design set into black curtains. Left rear, a subway entrance. Scrubwoman washing down the steps.

SCRUBWOMAN (*shouting*)

Hey, Apollo! On the job!

[*A Fat Tenor appears in the window.*

FAT TENOR

I was a little delayed this morning. My wife has just given birth to twins.

SCRUBWOMAN

That don't make no difference —

FAT TENOR

To you — no! To me — yes! It upsets the balance of the universe.

SCRUBWOMAN

Sing, for God's sake — ! How can we do our jobs if you don't sing — ?

[*The Fat Tenor begins his song. It is a waltz,*

an ardent operatic fragment come into strange new bloom through decay. It is queer, slightly mocking, yet amazingly sweet. He sings it beautifully. The words once may have amounted to something, but they have been worn down simply to tra-la-la. This song sung to the accompaniment of an invisible string quartet continues throughout the scene.

Immediately a march begins toward the subway entrance. A lot of pasty-faced people shuffle out of shadow and disappear down it in a steady stream. This, too, continues without interruption, monotonously, throughout the scene.

A Beggar enters briskly. Stops under archway and puts on dark glasses.

BEGGAR *(to Scrubwoman)*

Good morning, fine day.

SCRUBWOMAN

Fine!

[The beggar hangs around his neck a sign that reads "I am Blind and Dumb. Help Me!" Holds out a tin cup ready for business.

Enter a Drunken Man in evening clothes. From opposite side of stage, a moment later, enter a second drunken man, in rags. They stagger forward, try to avoid each other, fall helplessly

into an embrace. They wrestle with each other wearily; draw apart and exit each in the direction he came in.

FAT TENOR

Tra-la, la! Tra, la, la, la, la, la — !

[*The song goes on. The subway swallows many people.*

Enter a Milkman's cart. It is in silhouette, as if it had been cut out of cardboard. But the horse is mechanical. It winds up with a key. There is a single enormous bottle of milk in the cart. The Milkman, oddly enough, is human.

MILKMAN

Whoa! (*The horse stops. He descends, takes bottle of milk from cart and staggers up the steps with it. Places it on landing and comes down. Speaks to Scrubwoman*) Mornin'.

SCRUBWOMAN

Mornin'.

MILKMAN

Fine day.

SCRUBWOMAN

Fine.

MILKMAN (*climbing up on cart*)

Get up. (*Horse doesn't move*) Huh! Run

down! (*Gets out and winds up horse with huge key*) Go!

[*Horse goes. Exit Milkman.*

FAT TENOR

Tra, la, la! Tra, la! la! Tra, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!

[*The march of the subway people continues. A young girl in Pierrette costume enters. One of the Drunken Men, the respectable one, has dropped a flower. She picks it up, sniffs it ecstatically and begins to dance. A Pierrot enters and dances with her up the steps. Leaves her at the top, kisses his hand to her, comes down. As he goes out he removes his mask. His face is that of a death's-head. One catches a fleeting glimpse of it.*

Laura and Stressman come down the steps. The song goes softly.

LAURA

I've never been up so early before.

STRESSMAN

You get a new angle, a new world —

LAURA

Who's that man singing?

STRESSMAN

If you believe in mythology he's Apollo. If you don't, he's a broken-down operatic tenor.

LAURA

It's rather — beautiful.

STRESSMAN (*pointing to subway crowd*)

Is that beautiful?

LAURA

Who are they?

STRESSMAN

People going to the Factory Room.

LAURA

Does he sing to them?

STRESSMAN

Yes. He's paid to. One of the Host's hired men. Calls himself an artist. Thank God I'm not an artist. (*Pointing*) He sings them into slavery.

LAURA

Are they alive? They don't look as if they were alive.

STRESSMAN

You'll know, when you're one of them. Come on, we may as well —

LAURA

I'd like to go down the stairs — this one morning. If you don't mind — ?

STRESSMAN

All right.

[*Enter Edward Updike, in opera cloak and high silk hat. He walks stiffly toward steps.*

LAURA

Edward!

STRESSMAN

Who — ?

LAURA

The man I was going to marry.

EDWARD (*stops; turns*)

I beg your pardon? Oh! (*He takes off his hat*) Laura!

LAURA

You're up early, Edward.

EDWARD

I've been drinking to drown my sorrow. I understand it's the thing to do.

STRESSMAN

I'm sure you did it handsomely.

EDWARD

I beg your pardon. Why, it's the fellow — (*To Laura*) So you've taken to going about with persons who aren't respectable.

LAURA

Don't be absurd, Edward!

EDWARD

Laura, I love you. It's humiliating. I wouldn't

say it if I weren't drunk. And this music —! (*He moves toward her*) I love you. I want you. How strange! Your eyes are burning me.

LAURA (*laughs uncertainly*)

Don't tell me you have emotions, Edward!

STRESSMAN (*to Laura*)

Are you coming?

LAURA

Yes. (*To Edward*) You know it's useless. You and I are through with each other —

EDWARD

No. We are not through. I want you.

STRESSMAN

What fire, what passion! Let her alone, can't you?

EDWARD

You, too. I do not like you, but you are necessary. (*Points to Laura, Stressman and himself*) One — two — three. I am drunk. Let the drama go on.

[*He turns, walks up the steps.*

STRESSMAN

The drama? Ha, ha! Much drama there is in him.

LAURA (*thoughtfully*)

I don't know. Maybe I'm *not* through with him.

[She takes his arm. They go out through the archway center rear. Stressman drops coin in Beggar's cup. The Scrubwoman finishes washing down the steps, picks up her bucket and scrubbing brush; runs out. The Fat Tenor ends his song. The accompaniment runs on an extra bar or two, listless and sweet; then resolves itself unexpectedly into a jeering, blaring discord.

CURTAIN

Scene II

The Factory Room. A place of machinery reaching infinitely into shadow. Great reaching belts, a great wheel, a bobbin, a spindle. The heave and rhythmic clatter of machinery. People distributed among the machines, operating them and being a part of them.

Down front, right, a desk with chairs. A whistle blows, the machinery stops.

Silence.

BOSS (*enters right*)

There's been a slight accident. You may have time off, without pay, till we're able to start up again.

[*The workers file out. The Boss sits down at desk.*

ATTENDANT (*enters*)

The Chief Deputy to see you, sir.

BOSS

The Chief Deputy? Show him in.

ATTENDANT

Yes, sir.

BOSS (*glancing at card he holds in his hand*)

Find Number Twelve — J — 16 in the binding room and ask her to come here at once.

ATTENDANT

Yes, sir.

[*Goes out.*

CHIEF DEPUTY (*enters*)

Good morning, Mr. Director.

BOSS

Good morning, Mr. Chief Deputy. (*They shake hands*) Sit down. What can I do for you?

CHIEF DEPUTY (*displaying sheaf of pamphlets*)

I've come to ask you to distribute these pamphlets to your workmen. They were got up by the progressive element in the chapel room. They contain short, snappy sermons on such subjects as — for instance — the beauty of labor.

BOSS

Excellent.

CHIEF DEPUTY

It has also been suggested that we send a missionary to preach to the workers during the lunch hour. What do you think of it?

BOSS

I think it would interfere with their digestions.

CHIEF DEPUTY

I agree. One day a week is enough for any religion. Ah—you're not running this morning?

BOSS

A slight accident. A man got caught in one of the belts.

CHIEF DEPUTY

A man? What a pity! Was the poor fellow married?

BOSS

Yes. Our records show that he'd been married six months. I've sent for his wife.

CHIEF DEPUTY

Then I'll stay and express my pity to her personally.

ATTENDANT (*enters*)

Twelve — J — 16, sir.

BOSS

Come in. (*A Young Woman enters*) I regret to inform you that your husband Ten — J — 16 was caught in the belt this morning at 9.24 and crushed to death.

YOUNG WOMAN

Oh!

[*She staggers.*

BOSS

No fainting here.

YOUNG WOMAN (*straightens up; looks at him*)

What am I supposed to say?

CHIEF DEPUTY

My dear, permit me — my sympathy —

YOUNG WOMAN (*looks at him dazedly*)

I told Jim it was dangerous. But he kept on doing it —

BOSS (*scenting a breach of discipline*)

Doing what?

YOUNG WOMAN

You see. He worked in the stamping room, and I was in the bindery. We were apart all day, but the belt ran from my room to his, from him to me. He carried a piece of chalk in his pocket, and sometimes he'd reach up and mark a cross on the belt. The cross was for me in the binding room. It meant a kiss.

BOSS

Your husband broke the rule against sentiment in business. He has suffered the consequences.

CHIEF DEPUTY

But it's rather a beautiful story. I have a feeling there's a sermon in it.

YOUNG WOMAN

A sermon — !

BOSS

Never mind. Here's your accident policy. Go

down to the Treasurer's office and get your money.

YOUNG WOMAN

It ain't enough.

BOSS

It's exactly and scientifically enough.

YOUNG WOMAN

I've got a baby.

BOSS

You can't have. You've been married only six months.

YOUNG WOMAN

Just the same, I've got a baby.

CHIEF DEPUTY

Oh, oh, really! I'm afraid there isn't a sermon in it, after all.

BOSS

Sorry. Children born irregularly are not provided for.

YOUNG WOMAN

I know the rules.

CHIEF DEPUTY

Then why did you break them? Why did you surrender your — your purity to this man before he married you?

YOUNG WOMAN

I guess I loved him.

CHIEF DEPUTY

Oh!

BOSS

No sentiment in the Factory Room. That will do.

[*Young Woman nods, the slip of paper falls from her hand.*

YOUNG WOMAN (*suddenly and fiercely*)

I wish I was strong enough, I'd break every rule in this house! I'd take them in my hands and tear them — and tear them — and laugh. I know I can't do it. I'm too weak. I'll go on always obeying them and working. But I'd like to! (*Somberly*) You wait. There'll come a day, maybe on the Banquet Day. There's too many like me. You put us all together and we're strong, strong enough to destroy this house! You wait — !

BOSS

You've dropped your policy.

[*She nods again, picks up the paper, goes out without another word.*

CHIEF DEPUTY

Quite demented, poor creature! Give her the

pamphlet on Meekness in Time of Sorrow. It's there.

BOSS

She'll be meek enough, with a child to support. By the way, if you church people want to do something sensible for labor, I suggest that you start a campaign to wipe out syphilis.

CHIEF DEPUTY

Oh!

BOSS

Ten per cent. of our workers have syphilis. It's affecting business.

CHIEF DEPUTY (*rises*)

My dear sir, I must inform you that venereal diseases do not exist in the minds of religious persons, either orthodox or progressive. I see that you don't understand the religious mind, which is, if I may say so, extremely subtle. Good morning, sir.

BOSS

Good morning, Mr. Chief Deputy. (*Takes up telephone*) Hello. Repairs? Five minutes more? Good. The body has been cremated? Excellent!

ATTENDANT (*enters*)

Applicant for position, sir. Preliminary num-

ber — 5 — A — 21. Brought in by that damned poet who works here off and on.

BOSS

Call him by his number — not damned poet.

ATTENDANT

He has no number, sir. I've looked. He's down on the index as that damned poet.

BOSS

That's frivolous. Expurgate it. Show in the applicant.

ATTENDANT

Yes, sir. (*To persons outside*) This way.

[*Laura and Stressman enter.*

BOSS

You want a job?

LAURA

Yes.

BOSS (*to Stressman*)

And you — ?

STRESSMAN

No. I've still got a few pennies left.

BOSS

I trust, young man, that you're not spending your capital.

STRESSMAN

Why not? It's all I've a right to spend.

BOSS

No. Persons who spend what they themselves earn are disreputable. Persons who spend what other people earn are respectable.

STRESSMAN (*with a shrug*)

I know all that.

[*He takes out a cigarette and lights it.*

BOSS (*to Laura*)

How old are you?

LAURA

Twenty.

BOSS

You come from a good room.

LAURA

How do you know?

BOSS

You smell sweet. Persons coming from the Basement do not smell sweet.

LAURA

The Basement! (*To him*) Does it matter where I come from? I want work. Of course I've had no experience, but —

BOSS

I can see that.

LAURA

How?

BOSS

You still have color in your cheeks. Are you willing to start at once?

LAURA

Yes.

BOSS

You will operate one of the simple stamping-machines — this one — at thirteen and a half cents an hour. (*To Stressman*) No smoking!

[*Stressman crosses to desk, puts out cigarette, absent-mindedly lights another.*

LAURA (*looking at the machine*)

But I don't know how —

BOSS

The foreman will instruct you. No, you have a pleasant perfume. I'll instruct you myself.

STRESSMAN (*suddenly protesting*)

Don't! (*Laura looks at him, surprised*) You should never have come here. I should never have brought you. It's ghastly. They'll make a machine of you, squeeze the life out of you —

BOSS

Get out.

STRESSMAN

It's true. People who work here are nothing

but slaves. (*To Laura*) You might as well be in prison.

LAURA

But I want to work.

BOSS

She wants to work. (*To Laura*) You seat yourself, so. You place your right hand on the lever — so. With your left hand you push this small metal disc under the die —

LAURA

What's it for?

BOSS

It isn't necessary for you to know.

STRESSMAN

There you are! You give up your life to stamping holes in a piece of metal and you don't even know what the holes are for. I call that the complete vacuum of ignorance.

BOSS

Be silent. No smoking. (*To Laura*) Try it.

[*Laura seats herself at the machine.*

ATTENDANT (*enters*)

The reports of the accident, sir.

[*Boss reads it. Stressman crosses to Laura.*

LAURA *(to Stressman)*

I don't feel imprisoned. I feel as if, at last, I were a part of the life of this house.

STRESSMAN

Yes, I once — felt that way. But they soon knock that out of you.

LAURA

To be earning my own living. How thrilling! Why — I'm free!

STRESSMAN

Freedom at thirteen and a half cents an hour.

LAURA

Don't laugh. It really does mean something to me. It was this — or Edward.

STRESSMAN

Well, as between the two — ! But it hurts me to see you sitting at that machine.

LAURA

Why?

STRESSMAN

It's like delivering up a child to some heathen god!

LAURA

Don't be absurd! This machine isn't an ogre that's going to eat me. It isn't a bugaboo —

STRESSMAN (*with boyish eagerness*)
I say, have you ever seen the bugaboos in the Amusement Room?

LAURA
No.

STRESSMAN
We must go there some time; it's great fun. All the factory people go. On Saturday nights. Will you go with me?

LAURA
To the Amusement Room? Yes. I'd love to.

STRESSMAN
On Saturday night, then, I'll meet you here. Good-by.
[*He presses her hand.*

LAURA
The song! Don't forget I'm to be a part of that.

STRESSMAN
No. No — never —

BOSS (*puts down report*)
Good.

ATTENDANT (*enters*)
The repairs are finished, sir.

BOSS
Tell the engineer we're ready to resume.

ATTENDANT

Yes, sir.

[*Exit.*

STRESSMAN (*to Laura*)

Don't work any harder than you have to.

BOSS

Silence! Sabotage! Go away!

STRESSMAN

I'm going, and when my last penny has vanished, I'll come back, quite humbly, as befits my condition, and ask for a job. Till then, I'm free.

[*He strolls out.*

Boss strikes bell on his desk.

Attendant enters.

ATTENDANT

Yes, sir.

BOSS

That fellow who just went out — ! Have you erased from his record the words "damned poet" ?

ATTENDANT

Not yet, sir.

BOSS (*grimly*)

Then let them stand.

ATTENDANT

Yes, sir.

[*He goes out.*

The whistle blows. The machines start up. Laura sits at her machine being a part of the factory.

CURTAIN

Scene III

The Amusement Room. Saturday night. A large room, fantastically decorated in red and gold. Right, rear, a Merry-Go-Round, the figures of which, instead of being wooden horses, are grotesque-looking wooden humans on whose shoulders ride their living counterparts. The Merry-Go-Round gives off thin tinkling music — an adaptation of the Morning Waltz sung in the first scene of Act II. A slippery-slide slants in diagonally from the left. Across the back of the stage undulates a scenic railway, with formal cardboard mountains (which might be skyscrapers) behind it. Forward, right center, is an ornate bench done in red and gold.

Between the bench and the foot of the slide are several mirrors that distort the figures of persons standing before them. Concealed bellows in the left front entrance blow up the skirts of girls coming in or going out that way. There are attendants dressed as bugaboos to frighten the people. The Merry-Go-Round is spinning to its thin music. A stupid-looking couple come shooting down the slippery-slide.

GIRL

That's done — what next?

MAN

These here mirrors. You stand in front of 'em and they make you look funny.

GIRL

I don't wanna.

MAN

Well, they're a part of the show. If you wanna enjoy yourself you gotta do everything. We paid our money we might as well have the fun.

GIRL

Aw right.

[*They stand in front of the mirrors. The Scenic Railway Car passes. It is loaded with people having such white faces they might be clowns.*

MAN (*pointing at the mirror*)

God, you're funny. Ha, ha, ha!

GIRL

Whaddaya laughin' at?

MAN

You! Say, I wonder if you'll ever get to lookin' like that — say after we're married and you've had a lot of kids. (*Uneasily*) God, you was fat-lookin', your ankles was e-normous.

GIRL (*pulls him away*)

Never you mind about my — (*The hidden bellows blow up her skirts.*) Oh — !

[*She shrieks and draws back.*

MAN

I saw your legs, Sadie. You got pink garters on.

GIRL

Say, you needn't get fresh with me, just because — I'm a decent girl.

MAN

I never says you wasn't. I just says I saw your — (*She slaps him*) Aw, don't get sore, Sadie. I didn't mean nothin', I only meant — they was pretty —

GIRL (*smiling*)

Was they?

MAN

Sure! (*Puts his arm around her*) When you gonna marry me, Sadie?

GIRL

Say, we ain't rode on the scenic railway yet; le's go ride on it.

MAN

Aw, nix. I'm a trolley-car conductor. I don' wanna ride on no railway —

GIRL

You might as well enjoy yourself, now you're here.

MAN

Aw right, Sadie.

[*They go out, right. Another pair shoot down the slippery-slide; go out left. The wind machine blows up the girl's skirts. She shrieks. One of the bugaboos scares a group of young people just getting off the Merry-Go-Round. A workman comes and stands in front of the mirror. A demure-looking spinster in faded black comes stiffly shooting down the slide. Pantomime. The workman turns to look at her. She goes on. Hesitates, looks back, half smiles. The workman starts toward her, whereupon she turns her back. He stops, considers her a moment, then turns and strolls away.*

SPINSTER (*grasping arm of Bugaboo*)

That man. He almost spoke to me.

BUGABOO

No spooning in the Amusement Room. If you've been insulted call a policeman.

SPINSTER

But I wasn't insulted. I wish I had been.

BUGABOO

What?

SPINSTER

I've been coming to this room for years, hoping

that some day I'd be — I mean — insulted! (*Lowering her voice*) Confidentially, I'd be willing to go pretty far — (*With a curious passion*) I'll tell you just how it'll happen. Some day I'll come down the slide and there'll be a man standing at the foot of it. A stout man with broad shoulders and strong-looking arms. You know like you see in the clothing ads. He'll speak to me, and when I don't look at him, he'll follow me and say hello, and I'll say, it ain't right for you to speak to me. And he'll laugh and say, you're only young once, he'll say —

BUGABOO

That's right.

SPINSTER

And after awhile, we'll go on the Scenic Railway together and in the tunnel where you always hear the young people kissing he'll put his hand on my knee —

BUGABOO

What are you telling me for — ?

SPINSTER

Then he'll insult me, he'll ask me to go out into the hall with him, where it's good and dark, so dark your soul can't see what you're doing.

It's your soul that won't let you be insulted. Sometimes I wish I hadn't any soul. I know that's wicked and I — But I'm getting old and I've never been — No man has ever — wanted me. (*Dreamily*) I'm not so bad-looking, either — underneath.

BUGABOO (*taking off his helmet*)

Well, how'll I do? Eh?

SPINSTER (*screams*)

Oh, my God! A man! You're a man! I didn't know, I didn't realize. Oh, my God!

[*She rushes out.*

BUGABOO

Well, I'll be damned. (*Puts his helmet back on. Goes toward several young girls, scares them*) Boo!

[*The girls laugh, and go along. The Scenic Railway car passes. Its white faces now include those of the Stupid Couple.*

Laura and Stressman are seen among the people at the rear. They come forward to the bench.

LAURA (*seating herself*)

So many people. Are you sure they're all quite sane?

STRESSMAN (*sitting beside her*)

No one's quite sane. (*Looking at her*) You're having a rotten time.

LAURA

No — no, really, I —

STRESSMAN

You are. I should have known better than to bring you here.

LAURA

It is absurd. All this machinery to get a little sensation!

STRESSMAN (*stubbornly*)

I like it.

LAURA

Do you? You don't seem to! You seem depressed.

STRESSMAN (*slumping down on the bench*)

I am. I've run out of money. To-morrow I've got to go back to the Factory Room — or into the Basement.

LAURA

The Basement?

STRESSMAN

Yes.

LAURA

You've been spending your last cent on me.

STRESSMAN

I had to spend it somehow.

LAURA

Stressman — ! I — I have enjoyed it. I — (*Pointing*) Oh, look at that girl! (*The wind machine blows up the girl's skirts*) Look at her legs!

STRESSMAN

She wanted to show them all along. (*Turning to Laura*) The trouble with you is, you're still a damned lady!

LAURA

I'm not. I'm a poor working girl.

[*She looks at him; smiles oddly.*

STRESSMAN

Why do you look at me like that? You've been looking at me all evening!

LAURA

How?

STRESSMAN (*sullenly*)

I don't know. As if you wanted to crawl in through my eyes and curl up in my brain.

LAURA

Well, I don't! Yes, perhaps I do —

STRESSMAN

Why?

LAURA

Because you're stronger than I am, and I want

to belong to some strong thing. Or — perhaps it's just what you said the other night, when I came to your room —

STRESSMAN

Love?

LAURA

I'm not sure.

STRESSMAN

Do you know what love is? Have you ever been with a man?

LAURA

No.

STRESSMAN

Then maybe all you want is — the adventure?

LAURA

Maybe.

STRESSMAN

Why do you choose me, a common man — ?

LAURA

You're not a common man. You've got a song in you.

STRESSMAN

Oh, good God! What a place to discuss love — !

[*The Spinster is seen hovering near.*

LAURA

The Amusement Room? Why not? Don't you think love might be — amusing, Stressman?

STRESSMAN (*laughs*)

You're right, I'm not a common man. If I were, I'd have kissed you by this time —

[*He puts his arm along the back of the bench.*

LAURA

I don't mean here. I have a room downstairs. My own.

STRESSMAN

A room — !

SPINSTER (*darting forward*)

You were spooning. I saw you! It's not allowed. I'll report you —

LAURA

What — ?

STRESSMAN (*rises*)

What the devil do you mean?

[*A Bugaboo comes up.*

SPINSTER

They were spooning. He had his arm around her; he was going to kiss her —

BUGABOO (*perfunctorily*)

No spooning in the Amusement Room.

SPINSTER (*viciously*)

They ought to be arrested. It's a pity respectable people can't come here without seeing —! And heaven knows what it'll lead to! It ain't moral. They ought to be arrested!

STRESSMAN

So we ought. There's no crime like kissing. (*To the Spinster*) I take it you're not a criminal?

SPINSTER

I — I'm a decent, moral woman.

BUGABOO

Aw, come along, missus. (*He puts his arm around the Spinster; leads her away*) Let 'em alone. Yooman nature is yooman nature, the house through.

SPINSTER

It ain't right. It ain't moral. There ought to be a censorship. It ain't moral.

[*She goes out with the Bugaboo; he squeezes her waist; she gives a sudden shrill laugh.*

STRESSMAN (*resuming his place beside Laura*)

I'm sorry. It was stupid of me to —

LAURA

Morality! What good is morality? What's it for?

STRESSMAN

It's for making a virtue of cowardice. For instance, I've an impulse to squeeze your waist, but I get a perverse pleasure out of not doing it.

LAURA

No spooning in the Amusement Room!
[*She laughs.*

STRESSMAN (*suddenly reminiscent*)

My mother and father used to come here, courting. Think of that!

LAURA

Your father and mother! Tell me about them, Stressman.

STRESSMAN (*quietly*)

There's not much to tell. My father was a violinist. He belonged to the orchestra in the Theatre Room. He had to play the stuff they gave him. Old stuff! One day in the middle of a concert he threw down his violin and jumped on it — smashed it to bits. He died in the room for the insane.

LAURA

Stressman — !

STRESSMAN

My mother went to work in the Factory Room. She lasted two years. It was the rhythm —

LAURA

No wonder you want to destroy it!

STRESSMAN

Yes. I feel my father's tragedy, my mother's slavery pushing in me like a fœtus trying to burst its shell. I want to cry their cry and utter their protest — (*A silence. People come and go. The Scenic Railway car passes as before*) If I could sit down in some still place —! Take the thoughts that every poet knows and shape them with delicacy, with beauty — ! Instead I go shouting through the House, getting nothing but echoes. (*He turns to her*) When I look at you there are poems in my mind. I should like to give you jewelled words, to show off my riches and to see you shine — !

LAURA

Oh, I'm not worth it, Stressman!

BUGABOO (*approaches*)

Boo!

STRESSMAN (*to Laura*)

Boo!

[*He laughs.*

LAURA (*points*)

Look at all those people rushing to get on the Merry-Go-Round!

STRESSMAN

Idiots! No, I'm envious of them.

LAURA

Envious — ?

STRESSMAN

Because, in a clumsy sort of way, they're getting back to their childhoods. Damn it, why can't I get back to mine? Though it wasn't — much.

LAURA

Were you very poor?

STRESSMAN

I never came to this room till I was a grown man. Couldn't scrape up the price.

BUGABOO (*approaches*)

Boo!

STRESSMAN

My kid friends used to tell me about the Bugaboos. They laid it on — cruel little devils! I thought, if I could ever be frightened by a Bugaboo I'd be happy —

LAURA

Is it too late, now?

STRESSMAN

Yes. (*A pause*) Shall we go ride on the Merry-Go-Round?

LAURA

I'd love to.

[*They don't move.*

STRESSMAN

My mother never came here after she was married. I think she wanted to. She used to tell me about it. She was a gay creature — I mean — then. (*He is squeezing his hands between his knees*) I always thought, "When I grow up I'll be rich and take her to the Amusement Room again." But she died when I was — She dropped dead at her machine. (*A pause*) She was a gay creature —

LAURA

Poor boy!

STRESSMAN (*throws his arms around her and presses his head against her breast*)

I want you, I want you!

[*The Merry-Go-Round music tinkles along.*

CURTAIN

Scene IV

Laura's Room. A small, plain room, cheaply furnished. Bed, table, chairs, dresser. One window. A door rear. In the left wall, which is set diagonally across the stage, another door. To the right a curtained alcove.

The window shade is drawn, shutting out all but a thin edge of light. The room is dim. Laura is asleep on the bed. Stressman, fully dressed, sits in a chair facing her.

LAURA (*stirs and wakes*)
Stressman?

STRESSMAN
Yes.

LAURA
Where are you? Why is it so dark? Isn't it morning?

STRESSMAN
Yes. You were asleep. I didn't want to disturb you.
[*He goes to pull up the shade.*

LAURA (*stretching toward him a bare white arm*)
No. Not yet. I don't want the light — quite yet.

STRESSMAN (*bending over her*)
Laura!
LAURA (*in a low tone*)
Was it amusing?
STRESSMAN
You beautiful, beautiful — !
[*He kisses her.*
LAURA
You must let me get up. (*She does so*) Please may I have my shoes and stockings? (*Stressman gets them for her*) Thanks.
STRESSMAN
I like waiting on you.
LAURA (*putting on her stockings*)
I like waiting on myself. It's better than having a maid —
STRESSMAN
Did your maid dress you?
LAURA
Always.
STRESSMAN
Can't I — ?
LAURA
No.
[*He drops down before her, sitting on the bed; clasps her knees and presses his head against them.*

STRESSMAN

Why must we ever let in the light? It's so cold, so cruel —

LAURA (*gently*)

Let me go. (*He releases her; rises*) It's Sunday morning, isn't it?

STRESSMAN

What's that got to do with us?

LAURA (*putting on her shoes*)

I always used to go to chapel.

STRESSMAN

Are you beginning to feel wicked?

LAURA

That's stupid.

STRESSMAN (*laughs*)

Yes. I'm stupid because I'm happy. It's inevitable.

LAURA (*gets up; takes her clothes from a chair; goes toward alcove*)

It won't take me long to dress. Sit down and smoke a cigarette.

[*She goes behind the curtain. Stressman walks to window and raises the shade. The light comes into the room.*

STRESSMAN

Cold!

LAURA (*from alcove*)
What did you say?

STRESSMAN
Nothing. (*He sits down; takes out a cigarette but doesn't light it*) I don't like this.

LAURA
What?

STRESSMAN
Something's happening to us — to you. A metamorphosis.

LAURA
I'm getting dressed. That's all.

STRESSMAN
No. You're thinking.

LAURA (*after a pause*)
Yes, I am.

STRESSMAN
You're hiding from me — behind a curtain!

LAURA
I shall never hide from you.

STRESSMAN
Well, then — ?

[*She draws aside the curtain and steps out. She has on a kimono.*

LAURA (*going directly to him*)
Do you know what I was thinking, Stressman?

I was thinking of a certain moment last night, and trying to remember whether I loved you or hated you!

STRESSMAN (*looking at her steadily*)

I suppose love isn't far removed from hate.

LAURA

I want to be honest with you.

STRESSMAN (*taking her in his arms*)

You darling! (*Passionately*) I love you, I love you —

LAURA

No, please don't! Please, Stressman —

STRESSMAN (*still holding her with his look*)

Something else? What is it?

LAURA

It's this. I don't want you to assume too much because I let you stay here last night.

STRESSMAN

I'm not assuming anything. There's the fact.

LAURA

The fact's real enough. But what does it mean? I don't know.

STRESSMAN

It means love.

LAURA

Yes, but — (*She laughs confusedly*) Where's the

miracle that's supposed to happen? I don't feel that we're — one flesh!

STRESSMAN

Of course that's nonsense.

LAURA

I don't know. It might be true, some time — in some way. I should rather like it to be true. But — I must tell you this — I don't feel that I belong to you.

STRESSMAN

Why should you?

LAURA

Well, I don't. And yet I've an idea — an instinct — that tells me there could be a sort of miracle happen between us. Somewhere this miracle exists —

STRESSMAN

Not under this roof! (*Laughs*) We mustn't get solemn. (*Again he takes her in his arms*) Laura! (*Outside is heard a faint chime of bells*) Church bells!

LAURA

How sweet they are! Stressman?

STRESSMAN

Yes?

LAURA

Will you do something — quite foolish — with me?

STRESSMAN

Anything you like.

LAURA

I should like to go to chapel this morning.

STRESSMAN

What for? You know it's just a form.

LAURA

Still, I'd like to go.

STRESSMAN

All right.

LAURA

Thanks.

STRESSMAN

But I don't understand —

LAURA

Neither do I. Now please go out and let me finish dressing. Go walk up and down in the corridor. It'll clear your brain.

STRESSMAN

My brain never was clearer. I know love's supposed to be confusing. It isn't.

LAURA

It is, if you're a female.

STRESSMAN (*at the door*)
Five minutes?

LAURA
Ten.

STRESSMAN
Right.
[*He goes out.*

LAURA
Ah — ! (*She studies her face in the mirror*) What have you done, Laura Gildcrest? (*Straightens up; stands facing the audience*) I don't believe in your rules of chastity. It's my body. I'll love whom I please. (*Goes to window*) Listen, old church bells, old metal ringing and ringing, I don't belong to you any more. I belong to myself and — I —
[*She falters; her voice fails. She turns and begins mechanically to put up her hair.*
There is a knock at the door, left. Laura goes and opens it. Prostitute comes in. She has on a red kimono.

PROSTITUTE
Hello, dearie. Can I come in?

LAURA (*smiles*)
You are in — aren't you?

PROSTITUTE

Yeh. That's right *(Seats herself)* I come to see if I could borrow a drop of perfume. I run short last night.

LAURA

It was you who talked about the Joke.

[The church bells are heard.

PROSTITUTE

That's right. I guess you know more about it now. It gets y' sometimes, don't it? 'Specially when there's music, or — I wish them bells wouldn't ring!

LAURA

Why?

PROSTITUTE *(in a low tone)*

They make you afraid.

LAURA *(suddenly facing the other)*

Tell me. Have you ever felt that it would be a relief to go insane? A sort of escape — ?

PROSTITUTE

Yes! *(A pause)* Men don't feel that way. They only laugh. They're — beasts. Ain't they?

LAURA

I don't know.

PROSTITUTE

Whaddaya mean you don't — ? (*She hesitates*) Oh! (*Rises*) I guess I made a mistake.

LAURA

Wait! I haven't given you the perfume.

[*She does so.*

PROSTITUTE

Thanks (*Looks curiously at Laura*) How do you get by?

LAURA

I work. In the Factory Room.

PROSTITUTE

Gawd! How long you been there?

LAURA

Just a few days.

PROSTITUTE

I worked there more'n a few days, and believe me I'd rather do this — (*Nodding toward her bedroom*) — than t' slave my guts out in that hell hole. When I think of that belt goin' around them big drums — And that machine I worked at, it was like I was married to it.

LAURA

Don't!

PROSTITUTE

Huh! You've begun to feel it already. Wait

till you been there a while longer. You'll do anything. (*She goes toward door, left*) Well, thanks for the perfume. I'll bring it back.

[*Exit.*

LAURA

Don't bother. (*In a low tone*) Stressman — ? (*The church bells ring. She listens to them*) They make you afraid.

[*She takes off her kimono and puts on her dress. Edward, in correct morning costume, enters from the Prostitute's room.*

EDWARD

Good morning, Laura. I was sure it was you.

LAURA

Edward! (*She stares at him*) How did you know — ! How were you sure?

EDWARD

I recognized your perfume. She was sprinkling it on her kimono.

LAURA

You — ? With her — ?

EDWARD

Exactly. (*With complete poise*) You know that gentlemen go to prostitutes?

LAURA

Yes.

EDWARD

Then why not I — with her?

LAURA

Why not?

EDWARD

I met her last evening in the corridor. I had been drinking.

LAURA

You needn't explain.

EDWARD

I'm not explaining. I'm merely stating the fact — the chemical fact, if I may put it so.

LAURA (*shrugs her shoulders*)

Why not say simply that you find this girl — pleasing?

EDWARD

I don't. She's too real. She uses cheap scent. One prefers —

LAURA

Rose leaves! Yes, I know.

EDWARD

Are you disgusted?

LAURA

No. It's rather a relief to discover that you're human.

EDWARD (*imperturbably*)

I'm not human — except when I look at you.

LAURA

You don't realize that you're looking at a poor factory girl!

EDWARD

I realize it perfectly. The fact that you're living in this room definitely established your position. Under the circumstances it is quite possible to suggest what I have in mind. That is, a liaison.

LAURA

Edward, are you trying to seduce me?

EDWARD

I am. Your status is now that of a woman who may be seduced with propriety.

LAURA

You had always a delicate sense of phrasing, Edward. I'm sorry I must be blunt and tell you I already have a lover.

EDWARD

Not that disreputable poet?

LAURA

Yes.

EDWARD

My dear Laura, it won't last. He's vulgar. All poets are a trifle vulgar.

LAURA

I love him.

EDWARD

That has very little to do with it. It's a question of rhythms. When you've recovered from your infatuation you'll find yourself drawn back to the rhythm of your birth. You can't escape it. Not while this house stands.

LAURA

Then he and I together will tear down this house!

[*She goes to window; stands with her back toward him.*

EDWARD

I have made you an offer. When you're ready to accept it — let me know. I wish I might have married you. It would have been so much simpler. Well, now I'm going to chapel to repent of my sins.

LAURA (*turning*)

Edward, haven't you one friendly word to say to me?

EDWARD

Is it my fault if I haven't? You would be free — and make a scandal! I'm as much the victim of it as you are. (*Almost with emotion*) You can't break the rhythm!

LAURA

I understand.

EDWARD

Au revoir.

[*He goes out.*

PROSTITUTE (*enters*)

Here's your perfume. (*Gives it to Laura*) I heard all y' said to him. The door was open and I listened. Ha! It's funny, ain't it?

LAURA

Yes! (*Laughs*) I hope you aren't jealous of me — ?

PROSTITUTE

Jealous? Oh, no! I didn't mean that. I meant, it's funny his going to chapel to repent of his sins.

LAURA

I'm going to chapel, too.

PROSTITUTE

Why?

LAURA (*after a pause*)
To meet the ghost of my former self.

PROSTITUTE
The ghost — ? Uh-huh! (*Slowly*) I know what you mean. (*They look at each other*) Good luck.
[*She turns and goes out. The church bells ring.*

STRESSMAN (*enters*)
Laura.

LAURA (*turns*)
Oh! (*She smiles*) I'm ready.

STRESSMAN
There's a kind of beauty in those chimes.

LAURA
Yes.

STRESSMAN
But it doesn't mean anything.

LAURA
Not to you because you're strong.

STRESSMAN
And you — ?

LAURA (*shakes her head*)
Hold me in your arms — one moment — (*He puts his arms around her*) There — Now we'll go
[*He releases her. They go out.*

CURTAIN

Scene V

The Chapel Room.

A vault resembling the interior of a Bank, the roof of which is supported by the branches of a huge, petrified tree. The tree is dead-white, chalky. Its trunk rises at the left, rear. About this trunk is twined grotesquely a stony dead vine that suggests a human figure with drooping head and arms.

One branch of the tree forms an arch over the pulpit, left. The other branches spread out indefinitely, some sending up stony twigs, some returning to the ground like columns. The whole effect is one of solidified decay. The pipes of the organ behind the pulpit carry out this scheme. They are like the bones of a skeleton.

The pulpit has a scarlet cloth. On top of it stands a golden radio horn, from which a wire goes up among the branches. Beside the pulpit, lower down, is a small cage with golden bars like a cashier's window.

The pews are set at right angles to the back drop, which is a gauze curtain. Through this curtain appears vaguely a long flight of steps. There is a single stained-glass window, right rear. The figure is that of a Saint holding a stylized dollar sign.

The Chief Deputy, in a gorgeous robe, is seated

behind the pulpit. The organ plays softly. Two smartly dressed ushers show the people to their places. One notices Mr. and Mrs. Gildcrest, the Hostess of the Reception Room, the Self-made Man and his Wife, and Edward Updike.

The Richest Man comes in, attended by a valet, who carries a golden bank book. The Ushers seat the Richest Man in the front pew.

LITTLE BOY (*in the next pew*)

How much money has he got?

PARENT'S VOICE

Ssh!

LITTLE BOY

You said he was the Richest Man in the house. I want to know how much he's got?

RICHEST MAN (*turning*)

Here's a dime for you, little boy.

[*Gives child a dime.*

LITTLE BOY

Gee! It's new!

[*Parents rise, bow, make deprecatory murmurs.*

RICHEST MAN

Save it, my boy, and it will grow. It will grow.

MURMURS FROM CONGREGATION

It will grow, it will grow.

CHIEF DEPUTY (*rises*)

We will open our services with the usual chant.

[*All rise, except the Richest Man.*

CHANT

Praise the Host, our unknown benefactor,
Praise him,
Praise his silence and his mystery,
Glory to the hand withheld, the form remote,
the mind supreme in isolation —
Praise the Host,
Praise him, our unknown benefactor.

[*The congregation seats itself. Laura and Stressman come in, sit in one of the rear pews.*

CHIEF DEPUTY

The usual morning deposits will now be received at the cashier's window.

[*A number of people rise and form a line, bank books in hand. The Richest Man goes first. They file past the cashier's window, make their deposits and return to their places.*

TENOR SOLO (*while this is going on*)

In golden rooms my soul shall dwell
When as I climb the stair at e'en;
O troubled tenancy, farewell —
In golden rooms my soul shall dwell
Serene.

How oft in humble rooms and cold
Have come these visions of thy love!
Until at last, by death made bold
With thee I dwell in rooms of gold
Above!

[*The money-taking is over. Chief Deputy rises and opens Service Book.*

CHIEF DEPUTY (*in a rich, droning voice*)

Now in the beginning there was no house, and the man and woman were ashamed. And they came and saw a great tree standing. And at the foot of the tree was a hollow place, and the roots of the tree were in it. And the Host said, let a house be built in the place of the tree, for the concealment of your bodies. And they sweated, and built the house, and the river of their sweat was greater than the two rivers by the garden where they were not allowed. And they said, this tree shall be called the tree of life, instead of the other, for it has sheltered us in our fear and in our shame. And the tree was turned to stone, that it might endure forever.

[*He closes the book. The organist strikes a chord.*

CHIEF DEPUTY (*studying notes*)

Before listening to the sermon I should like to

remind you that the annual Banquet Day is near at hand. As usual, seats at the table will be sold to the highest bidders. This is, of course, the one day in the whole year when we have with us the actual — though concealed — presence of the Host. As it was in the beginning, so is it now, and shall be evermore. All bids should be addressed to the Chief Deputy, Chapel Room. We will now listen to the morning sermon. (*He turns a dial connected with the radio horn. A whirring sound is heard*) Hear ye the Host, whose voice is in all things.

[*He sits down, instantly goes to sleep. The congregation dozes off.*

THE VOICE FROM THE HORN

Two times two are four,
Two times three are six and six are twelve.
Two times twelve are twenty-four and nine are thirty-three.
(*Pause*)
Three times three are nine,
Three times four are twelve,
Three times twelve are thirty-six and six are forty-two —

STRESSMAN (*leaping to his feet*)

Wake up! (*The congregation comes to with a start*) Wake up and listen to the god from the machine!

CHIEF DEPUTY (*turning off the horn*)

Be silent! How dare you interrupt the message of the Host!

STRESSMAN

Electricity! Mathematics! Money! Death! You're worshipping death.

CHIEF DEPUTY

Blasphemer!

STRESSMAN

Death, I tell you. Fools, cowards — ! You stink of death!

LAURA (*suddenly jumping up*)

Stressman! No, no! Stop. You shan't — it's dreadful. Not in the Chapel Room.

STRESSMAN (*dazed*)

You! You side with them — ?

MRS. GILDCREST (*crying out*)

Laura!

LAURA

Mother!

[*A silence.*

CHIEF DEPUTY

This disturbance must end. Kindly leave —

STRESSMAN

Leave? (*He laughs*) Yes, since I still have some life in me. (*Raises his hands impotently*) You killed my mother and my father. You — ! Their blood for your altar-cloth, your music drowning their cries. But I live! Look at me! Some day I'll come to you with a new music, a new song like fire and like swords — !

[*He breaks off, turns and rushes out.*

MRS. GILDCREST

Laura? (*Turning to pulpit*) It's Laura, my daughter. Don't you know her — ? My daughter — !

GILDCREST

My dear! Not so loud.

CHIEF DEPUTY

Laura Gildcrest. Yes, I remember! (*Sternly*) Young woman, come forward — ! (*Laura goes blindly to foot of the pulpit*) It is rumored through the house that you have left the room to which the Host in his wisdom has assigned you. Worse yet, it is said that you have made friends with a disreputable character, a man

who holds radical and blasphemous views, no doubt the fellow who just ran away —

LAURA (*lifting her head for the first time*)

Ran away? Who — Where — ? (*She looks about in utter surprise*) Stressman?

[*She starts down the aisle.*

MRS. GILDCREST (*putting out her arms to her daughter*) Laura!

GILDCREST

I forbid you. The girl is damned. I disown her.

[*He forces Mrs. Gildcrest back into her pew.*

LAURA

Stressman? Stressman — ! [*She runs out.*

CHIEF DEPUTY

Let us repeat the chant of praise.

[*All rise, except Richest Man. Music starts up. They begin the chant.*

At the same time, down the steps seen through the gauze curtain at the rear passes the procession of Flagellants. They descend in silhouette, the Man with the Cross leading, the others rhythmically beating themselves with whips.

CHANT (*by the congregation*)

Praise the Host, our unknown benefactor,
Praise him,
Praise his silence and his mystery —

CURTAIN

ACT THREE

Scene I

The Corridor. The stairs as before. Forward, left, a bench on which Laura and Stressman are seated. Behind them a potted plant droops over their heads a single branch bearing strange flowers, strange leaves.

Upper right, an oblong window with a Clubman in it. Clubman has a smooth bald head and an enormous belly. He is reading a Sunday newspaper. He takes out of his pocket a cigar, puts it in his mouth.

CLUBMAN

Boy!

[A bell boy appears in the window; lights Clubman's cigar; disappears.

The Clubman reads his newspaper.

STRESSMAN

So I cried out. I couldn't help it. (*Laura doesn't answer*) I'm sorry I made a fool of myself. It was childish.

LAURA

And I — ? I failed you, Stressman.

STRESSMAN

Only for a moment.

LAURA

That moment was important.

STRESSMAN

Then you followed me.

LAURA

I couldn't stay there in the Chapel Room. And I wanted to explain — (*She turns to him*) Don't you see that underneath I still belong to them?

STRESSMAN

No!

LAURA

I'm cut off from them, and yet — (*A pause*) You can't break the rhythm. That's what they were always saying, and it's true. You can't break —

STRESSMAN

Laura!

LAURA

I'm frightened.

STRESSMAN

Of what? Of your love for me?

LAURA

No. That would be a new fear. This is old.

I've known it always! A fear of this house, this whole house — !

STRESSMAN

The fear of living.

LAURA

Yes.

STRESSMAN

There's only one way to overcome that. (*Pause*) I've decided to go into the Basement, to live.

LAURA

Live? In the Basement — !

STRESSMAN (*takes her hands*)

You must go with me.

LAURA

No!

STRESSMAN

That night when you came to my room you said —

LAURA

Yes, I thought I wanted to. I thought — But to live in it! Among those people, in that darkness, being drawn into that sound. To live among those people— !

STRESSMAN

They're my instrument, my orchestra. I must learn to know them.

LAURA (*in a low tone*)
I can't.

STRESSMAN
Not with me?

LAURA
I can't, I can't! Don't ask me to —

STRESSMAN
Then I'll go without you! (*He rises*) You're thinking of him — ! That straw man you were going to marry! Why don't you call him? He'll be coming this way from chapel —

LAURA
No, I don't want him. I don't want any man. (*She, too, rises and faces him*) This morning I told you I didn't know whether I loved you or hated you. Now I know! It's hate. I hate you, Stressman, with my whole body that you held naked —

STRESSMAN
So now you don't find it amusing! Why did you follow me? Why did you — ?

LAURA
Yes, I followed you. And all that happened was this: another door, closing, shutting me into another room! It was my fault, if you like — Well, at least I went the limit. Last night

you had me — all night, like a whore — ! But it was only my body, do you understand? Only my body being dragged through slime —

STRESSMAN

I should have known. I've had women before this. What you wanted was the experience, and now you find it hateful — Yes, go back to your rooms where there's nothing but a funeral going on — You'll make a charming dead woman! I'm going to the living, the living — !

[*He rushes out. His voice is heard off-stage.*

STRESSMAN'S VOICE

The stairs! — Dark as hell! (*He laughs*) Old steps of filth, I go down you shouting and laughing. I, Stressman! (*An interval*) Open! Open to me.

[*The Basement murmur is heard, loud and near at hand. Stressman's voice answers. Then silence.*

The Flagellants come down the steps, led by the Man with the Cross.

FIRST FLAGELLANT (*to Laura*)

You are unhappy, sister. Come join our band and be saved.

LAURA

How?

FIRST FLAGELLANT (*as the others pause in their march*)

Take this whip. Strike! Mortify the flesh! The unhappy flesh! See!

[*He strikes himself.*

LAURA

What do you gain by that?

FIRST FLAGELLANT

The beauty of suffering! The beauty of sacrifice!

THE OTHERS (*striking themselves*)

The beauty of sacrifice! The beauty of wounds!

LAURA

No, no! It's horrible. Let me alone.

FIRST FLAGELLANT

As you will. But you are lost, sister! Lost in sin.

THE OTHERS (*chanting*)

Lost, lost in sin! (*The procession forms as before*) The beauty of suffering! The beauty of wounds!

[*They go out.*

A Creature resembling Laura's Stamping Machine enters from the opposite side of the stage.

THE MACHINE

Laura!

LAURA

What is it? Who are you?

THE MACHINE

I'm the machine you work at through the week.

LAURA

What do you want of me?

THE MACHINE

Your soul.

LAURA

My soul?

THE MACHINE

Give yourself to me. I'll turn you into an automaton. You will feel neither joy nor pain. You will have freedom, at a price.

LAURA

Thirteen and a half cents an hour.

THE MACHINE

Perhaps a little more. Some souls come higher. Only belong to me, and I will show you the way of escape. The only true and beautiful way!

LAURA

What way?

THE MACHINE

Through surrender and slavery. I am the machine, the servant of the Host. Be my servant, and I will reveal to you the beauty of labor!

LAURA (*crying out*)

No, no! Go away, or I'll have you arrested!

THE MACHINE

I can't be arrested because I'm not alive. Only living things can be put into jail.

LAURA

Surrender? Slavery? I won't —

[*Edward enters.*

THE MACHINE

You will, you must. If not with me, then — with him. (*Steps back, toward exit*) If you prefer that sort of thing.

[*The Machine disappears.*

LAURA

Edward!

EDWARD

Laura!

LAURA

Edward, take me with you. I'm ready. I want to go with you — now!

EDWARD

Where?

LAURA

Anywhere. To your room.

EDWARD

Ah! (*He smiles*) How beautiful you are!

LAURA

Then take me because I'm beautiful.

EDWARD

Yes. Why not?

LAURA

Only you must buy me perfumes — you must fill the room with flowers. I want to drown myself in perfumes.

EDWARD

The illusion. One prefers the illusion.

LAURA (*laughing uncontrollably*)

Yes, one prefers the illusion.

EDWARD

Come.

LAURA (*takes his arm*)

The illusion! [*They go out.*

CLUBMAN (*in window*)

Boy! [*Bell boy appears, hands Clubman a large red rose. Clubman sniffs it ecstatically, gives it back to bell boy, goes on reading the newspaper.*

CURTAIN

Scene II

The Basement. A place of bluish shadow crowded with grotesque forms hardly recognizable as human. Huge piles hold up a ceiling that seems to crush down these forms; it slants backward into deep shadow. One does not see the end of this place. From time to time a hoarse murmur is heard. In the left foreground a shawled woman sits holding a baby. Her head is thrown back against a pillar and her eyes stare. She does not move throughout the scene. There is a narrow stairway leading up right. At the foot of these stairs sits an emaciated man pulling rags to pieces. Another comes in, dumps a fresh pile of rags beside him. The two look at each other but do not speak. The first goes on with his work. Near by an Idiot is eating something out of a tin pan. Three washerwomen are seen vaguely in the background, their bodies moving up and down in unison as they bend over their boards, and three tailors with white faces sit sewing in unison.

Other things happen without point or meaning. Vague movements in bluish twilight. A pale ghost of a young man comes twitching in; pauses; takes out a small vial, shakes a white powder on to the back of his hand and sniffs it hungrily. He goes

and leans against the proscenium, where he stands smiling.

Stressman stands on the steps with some light from above on his face. A Drunken Man, absurd in his rags, comes forward, dragging four Blind Men with him. The Blind Men cling to one another's hands.

DRUNKEN MAN (*to Stressman*)

I told you, sir — told you I'd get 'em. Four blind singers. Four blind mice. No, there were only three mice, eh? Ha, ha, ha! You get rusty on your literchoor down here. But I've got your singers for you, sir.

STRESSMAN

Why are they blind?

DRUNKEN MAN

Why, sir, they've been staring too long at the sun. The beautiful sun!

FIRST BLIND MAN

We worked in the coal pits, your honor.

THE OTHER THREE

Yes, your honor.

[*They bow.*

STRESSMAN

Stand up, why should you bow to me?

DRUNKEN MAN

Because you come from up there, sir. (*To the blind ones*) His face is clean. It shines like the sun.

[*The murmur is heard.*

FIRST BLIND MAN

What do you want of us, your honor?

STRESSMAN

I want to teach you a song I've made. Can you sing?

DRUNKEN MAN

Yes, your honor. They have voices, though they have no eyes. Only give them the pitch and the tune.

STRESSMAN

The words first. (*Reads from manuscript*) Gather the forces, gather the storm —

FOUR BLIND MEN

Gather the forces, gather the storm —

STRESSMAN

Gather the bodies of men!

FOUR BLIND MEN

Gather the bodies of men!

STRESSMAN

Strike up, strike down, the blow is in us as the lightning in the cloud. Gather the cloud

and gather the thunder out of hungry mouths —

BLIND MEN

Strike up, strike down, the blow is in us as the lightning in the cloud. Gather the cloud and gather the thunder out of hungry mouths —

[*A hoarse murmur, a kind of wail is heard.*

DOPE FIEND (*to woman leaning against pillar with child in her arms*)

The Madonna! Mother and child. How beautiful they are —

STRESSMAN

Is there no musician here who can play the music I've written?

DRUNKEN MAN

No, your honor — Yes, your honor. There's a madman here who was a musician. We keep him in a cage — a cage with iron bars. Sometimes he plays music on the bars of his cage — with a hammer. A sort of music —

STRESSMAN

Get him!

DRUNKEN MAN

Yes, your honor.

[*He disappears in the shadow.*

IDIOT

He, he! I'm sorry I can't ask you all to dine with me. But I move only in the best circles — the best society! (*To man picking rags*) Will you have some sweetbreads?

MAN PICKING RAGS (*bursting into a roar of laughter*)

Sweetbreads! He's got no brains — but he's got sweetbreads!

[*He stops laughing as suddenly as he began; goes on working.*

DOPE FIEND (*to woman leaning against pillar*)

You are beautiful. The beauty of your woman's soul transcends your rags — I say it transcends — I love you, I adore you. That is reality, all the rest a dream. A purple dream with strange lights. No, don't look at me. There is death in your eyes, and I live, I live as sharp as fire. In loneliness I love you, O Madonna, holding the child on your knees. Wasn't there a story once — ? No matter. It's all perfect. The perfection of loneliness. I am alone in paradise, among strange lights; I lean and spread my hands against a golden wall. Alone, alone —

[*The musician is brought forward in a small cage on wheels.*

STRESSMAN (*to Drunken Man*)

If I speak to him will he understand?

MUSICIAN (*peering through bars of his cage*)

I understand everything, sir. Harmony, counterpoint, that light coming down the stairs. I understand even this cage, and that, sir, is the pinnacle of understanding. At first I protested, violently, against my imprisonment. But finally I understood. I am an artist, sir, and an artist needs oblivion as a snail needs its shell. This cage is my oblivion. And I make music from it. Each one of these bars is separately tuned — all things are separately tuned. But it remained for me, a man of genius, to discover the voices in these bars of iron. Listen, sir.

[*He strikes with a hammer the bars of his cage.*

STRESSMAN

Yes. They do ring!

MUSICIAN

Do they not, sir? Ha, ha! They call me mad, a madman. So I am. Madness on one hand, oblivion on the other. What artist does not walk between those two escapes? You take one or the other if you love beauty. There's no straight road toward creation — none!

STRESSMAN (*thrusting manuscript between the bars*)
Can you make anything of that?

MUSICIAN
Very simple, sir. Very simple. Ha, ha! And interesting — interesting. An arrangement of percussions. You're a musician, too.

STRESSMAN
A sort of musician.

MUSICIAN
Sir, let me look at you. An artist, like myself. You and I, we understand. Yes, I'll make a symphony of your percussions on the bars of my cage. A loud and beautiful symphony.
[*He strikes the bars. The wailing begins again. A crowd gathers. One notices in it a huge Negro, half naked, with glistening eyes.*

STRESSMAN
Play! (*To Blind Men*) And you, sing!

DRUNKEN MAN
They may be a bit ragged, sir.

STRESSMAN (*excitedly*)
It doesn't matter; sing! Sing whatever comes into your heads.

BLIND MEN (*singing*)
Gather the forces, gather the storm —
Gather the bodies of men!

Strike up, strike down, the blow is in us as the lightning in the cloud,
Gather the cloud and gather the thunder out of hungry mouths!

DRUNKEN MAN

Bravo! Bravo!

A VOICE

It's crazy. It makes me want to smash things!

WOMAN'S VOICE

It makes me want to stop washing dirty clothes and dance.

OTHER WOMEN'S VOICES

Dance! Dance! Dance!

A MAN (*pressing forward*)

It reminds me of something —

STRESSMAN

What?

MAN

Once I was one of a gang that went up to mend a leak in the roof. There was strong wind blowin'. It blew hard, and I was thinkin', God, I'd like to be that wind instead of a man fixin' a roof. I'd blow the damn roof off, just for fun. Ha, ha! I'd catch it under the gables and lift it up, and then I'd yell to the things that make rain and I'd say, There they are,

with the roof off! Go on and soak 'em, drown 'em like rats. Ha, ha, ha, ha!

STRESSMAN

And my music reminds you of that?

MUSICIAN

My music!

MAN (*confusedly*)

Yes, it does.

NEGRO (*loudly*)

Yo' don't feel no wind blowin' down whar I ben, cleanin' out de cesspool! No wind dar! Only stink.

STRESSMAN

My song for the wind! I give it to you. Something to bind you together to make you one. A chain, a linkage. Come on, all of you!

[*The musician hammers the bars of his cage. They all sing.*

Silence.

DRUNKEN MAN

It's great. It's like booze. It makes you strong.

SECOND VOICE

Hell, we're strong enough. I'll tell y', mates, let's go marchin' up the steps. Let's serenade 'em, up there!

[*A fierce shout goes up.*

WOMAN'S VOICE

You'll never get there; you'll get scared and quit.

STRESSMAN

As long as you stick together and keep singing —

VOICE

Let's go. Let's climb. Come on, let's go.

[*A silence.*

DOPE FIEND

Strange lights, strange dream.

STRESSMAN

Well — ?

NEGRO

Trouble with dat song, it ain't us.

VOICES

It's magic. It's good dope. Shut up, Nigger. It makes you want to dance!

NEGRO

It ain't us!

STRESSMAN

What do you mean?

NEGRO

It didn't come out of us. Das what I mean! Us, us livin' down here in de darkness and de stink — ! What we got to do wid a song like

dat? When us gets up dar, de fust time a cop lif' his club, he gwine break de song and drive us back. I knows, I feels it in my bones. It ain't us.

IDIOT

They've got cake up there.

A VOICE

We'll all eat cake!

VOICES

Cake, cake, cake, cake! Come on, Nigger!

NEGRO

Not me, I'm tired. I'm gonna res' my bones.

[*He lies down near woman by pillar.*

STRESSMAN

Don't listen to him! I tell you it's got to come; it's all I've got left. It's all I've got —

DRUNKEN MAN (*grasping his arm*)

Ssh! Ssh! Look! The missionary!

[*Points to steps, down which is descending the policeman followed by the Young Deputy.*

POLICEMAN

Come on, sir. Nothin' to be afraid of.

DEPUTY

I'm not afraid.

POLICEMAN

That's right. They're all tame here. Stand

back, you guys, make way there! Here's a Deputy come to put a little salvation into your souls.

YOUNG DEPUTY

How dark it is! I've never been down here before.

POLICEMAN

That's all right. They like it that way, don't y', eh?

[*A murmur from the crowd.*

YOUNG DEPUTY

Don't speak so harshly to them. The same roof covers us all. We are all guests of the same Host. (*To the crowd*) My brothers, I come to you with the annual message from above. It is the time of the Banquet, the Feast of Hospitality.

IDIOT

They've got cake up there.

YOUNG DEPUTY (*turning to him*)

Yes, my poor brother, but you have finer food than that! (*He smiles*) You have eaten the bread of humility. Therefore you are blessed. Fellow guests! Though you have no gold in your pockets to buy places at the table, still

you have your share in the Feast. You have a spiritual participation in the food.

[*Murmur is heard.*

DOPE FIEND (*crying out from proscenium*)

Yes, that's it, that's it.

DRUNKEN MAN

Bravo! Bravo!

POLICEMAN

Silence! (*To Deputy*) Go on, your reverence.

YOUNG DEPUTY

Ah — I feel a trifle faint! There seems to be a dreadful odor here —

A VOICE

It's the Nigger! Throw out the Nigger!

YOUNG DEPUTY

No, no! I'll continue. (*With an effort*) Therefore I say to you, Welcome! Welcome to the board! On the Banquet Day you shall be present — in spirit. And remember, brothers, that as you endure in this life, so you shall be rewarded in the next. You, who suffer poverty and oppression, shall find peace and great plenty in the hospitality to come. Your souls, your immortal souls, shall rise out of this Basement to dwell in rooms of gold. The blessing of the Host be upon you!

[*A prolonged murmur from the crowd.*

POLICEMAN

Is that all, sir?

YOUNG DEPUTY

Yes, I had to cut it short because — Really! I don't think this place is sanitary. Something should be done. How do we go out?

DRUNKEN MAN

Are you lost, your honor?

POLICEMAN

Silence! This way, sir.

YOUNG DEPUTY (*as they go up steps*)

Yes, yes. Absolutely unsanitary. Ah!

[*They disappear.*

STRESSMAN (*comes forward*)

Now we can go on with the singing.

DOPE FIEND

Rooms of gold, rooms of gold —

DRUNKEN MAN

Maybe it's true.

STRESSMAN

True? That stuff he handed you?

THE MAN WHO ONCE MENDED THE ROOF

They're educated men, them deputies!

STRESSMAN

Stuff, I tell you! You'll never see rooms of gold, unless you climb up to them here and

now! (*To musician*) You! Strike iron! Pound out the symphony —

MUSICIAN

He had a cultured voice. Perhaps he, too, is an artist in his way!

STRESSMAN

Oh, God! You must listen to me, all of you. You're my instrument, I've come to you, bringing you freedom — release — the new rhythm — !

DOPE FIEND (*suddenly springing to center of the stage*)

Liar! Alien! You want to push us down deeper, deeper, deeper. You want to drive us from our Paradise, from rooms of gold. You want to trample us in the slime of your song. Look! Here is beauty and loneliness. Look at her face. The Madonna! Leave us our loneliness. Our Madonna!

A VOICE

That's right. We'd only get smashed. They'd smash us, they'd beat us down. We'd get it in the neck, that's all.

THE ROOF MENDER

Who the hell is this guy anyway? (*To Stressman*) We don't know you! You don't belong

here. Maybe you was just sent to raise hell with us.

[*A shout goes up. The Musician pounds on the bars of his cage.*

Silence.

STRESSMAN (*quietly*)

You aren't worth it.

DRUNKEN MAN

His honor says we ain't worth it.

STRESSMAN

No. (*Blazing out at them*) Cowards!

VOICES

The hell with him. Throw him out. Shove him up the stairs. The hell with him!

[*They rush forward, seize Stressman and push him toward stairs.*

STRESSMAN (*striking the hands from his body*)

Let go of me, you rats!

THE DOPE FIEND (*darting forward*)

Here! A gift from the Basement! (*He brandishes a revolver*) Take this and destroy yourself — not us! A wonderful gift. The key to paradise. In your pocket.

[*He drops the revolver in Stressman's pocket. Stressman pays no attention to this. He stands on the steps, facing them. He is quiet again.*

STRESSMAN

No, you aren't worth it. But in your own blind way you're right. I've failed because I wasn't one of you. It must come out of your own flesh and blood. Your own —I've failed. [*He goes up the steps, disappears.*

DOPE FIEND (*softly*)

Oh, Madonna, Madonna!

NEGRO (*suddenly jumping up*)

Das it! Das de song! I was dreamin', brudders, and hit all come to me in de dream. Lissen to me, brudders! Yar de song! (*He sings*)

Bum, bum, bumity-bum!
Bum, bum, bumity-bum!

(*He laughs wildly*)

Das it! Das all dey is to it —

Bum, bum, bumity-bum!
Bum, bum, bumity-bum!

THE CROWD (*taking up the catch phrase*)

Bum, bum, bumity-bum!
Bum, bum, bumity-bum!

(*The Idiot begins to beat on his tin pan. The people march, the Negro leading and beating time with his hands. They march off into the far shadows of the Basement, carrying the Musician with them, and singing. Song grows fainter.*)

Bum, bum, bumity-bum!
Bum, bum, bumity-bum!

[*It sinks down almost to a whisper; one feels only the throb of it.*

DOPE FIEND (*approaching woman by pillar*)

Alone, Madonna. You and I in our loneliness. Our Paradise! (*He bends over her*) She is dead. The poor sweet saint, the poor empty mother. Sleep, sleep, Madonna! There is a heaven to be found in sleep. You are in heaven, sleeping. (*He covers her head with her shawl*) See, I draw about you this tapestry of stars—

CURTAIN

Scene III

The Corridor outside the Banquet Room. A narrow space before a black curtain. In the curtain a window and in the window faces massed for a spectacle. Three steps left lead to the door of the Banquet chamber. Against the back-drop a straggling line of respectable people guarded by two policemen. At the entrance to the Banquet Room a Doorman in uniform. Complete silence. The Chief Deputy enters, followed by Sub-Deputies. Then the Richest Man, whose valet tosses new dimes to the people. Then a parade of the elite, walking two by two. Among these are Mr. and Mrs. Gildcrest. The procession reaches the steps before the door and stops, forming a reception line. The Chief Deputy stands on the top step facing right. The Ark of the Host is carried in on the shoulders of four flunkeys in white knee-breeches and red coats. A murmur goes up.

THE PEOPLE (*murmuring and uncovering their heads*)

The Host — The Ark of the Host — The Host!

[*The door of the Banquet Room swings open, admitting the Ark. The Chief Deputy follows it; then the others. The people break ranks and*

crowd in, shepherded by the policeman. During this slight confusion Stressman enters, left rear. He stands in the background, a little apart, watching the people

Laura and Edward enter, right. They stop to let the crowd go on.

EDWARD

We can't sit at the table together. You know that. I'm risking my reputation as it is.

LAURA

I know. I won't compromise you. I'll stay well in the background.

EDWARD

I'm sorry, but —

LAURA

It's all right.

EDWARD

I don't understand why you wanted to come!

LAURA

I wanted to because —(*She catches sight of Stressman*) I'll wait here a moment. You go in.

EDWARD

Perhaps that would be better. Au Revoir.

[*He goes in at the heels of the crowd.*

Laura and Stressman are alone, except for the Doorman.

LAURA
Stressman —

STRESSMAN (*comes forward*)
Laura! (*He checks himself*) You're going in?

LAURA
Yes, I — (*A pause*) Stressman, have you been living down there — ?

STRESSMAN (*nods*)
I've failed.

LAURA
Failed?

STRESSMAN
It doesn't matter. The Banquet's the thing. (*He looks at her*) I saw you — with him. Why has he left you here?

LAURA
Because he — Because I —

STRESSMAN
What is he to you, or you to him? What are you to him?

LAURA (*coldly*)
His mistress.

STRESSMAN
Then you've failed, too.

LAURA

Yes. It's failure. (*A pause*) Do you despise me, Stressman?

STRESSMAN

No.

LAURA

It's strange how one seems always to be beating against a blank wall. The finest things — broken against a wall! Is there no way out?

STRESSMAN

Not while this house stands.

LAURA

Then — what's left?

STRESSMAN

Something in my pocket.

LAURA

What?

STRESSMAN

This.

LAURA

A revolver.

STRESSMAN

It was a gift from the Basement. A present from my orchestra.

[*He looks at it; smiles.*

LAURA

You mean to kill yourself?

STRESSMAN

Why not?

LAURA

And I — ? Yes, both of us, Stressman.

STRESSMAN

Together?

LAURA

Yes.

STRESSMAN

Here? Now?

LAURA

Yes — No! In there. While they're eating and talking —

[*She laughs.*

STRESSMAN

In the presence of the Host! Good. (*He returns the revolver to his pocket*) So that's settled. And there are no more walls — !

LAURA

Stressman!

[*She takes his head in her arms; kisses him; turns quickly and goes in. After a moment Stressman starts after her. The Doorman stops him.*

SCENE III : : : : : : : THE CORRIDOR

DOORMAN

You can't go in. You're not dressed for it.

STRESSMAN

Dressed?

[*He looks down at his shabby clothing.*

DOORMAN

You're not respectable.

STRESSMAN

You're mistaken. I'm fatally respectable. Moreover, I'm tremendously important to this occasion. Look at me! Don't you know me?

DOORMAN (*cringing*)

Why, no, sir. Who are you, sir?

STRESSMAN

I'm the skeleton at the feast!

[*Laughs, pushes aside Doorman; goes in.*

CURTAIN

Scene IV

The Banquet Room. A mediæval room, simply and beautifully decorated, lighted with candles set in iron brackets. Broad steps lead up, rear. At the top of these steps, on a landing, is deposited the Ark of the Host. A stained-glass window over the landing lets in a soft light. On either side of the Ark an arched doorway leads out onto a balcony.

Down front, center, is the banquet table, at which the guests already are seated, with the Chief Deputy at the head of it and the Young Deputy at the foot. The latter obviously is nervous and eats nothing. Two of the flunkeys serve at the table. The other two guard the Ark, the curtains of which are closed.

The people are huddled into an alcove, right rear. The entrance door is at the right, but there are other doors. Laura and Stressman are seen among the onlookers. At the table are the Richest Man, on the Chief Deputy's right, the Self-made Man and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Gildcrest, the Hostess of the Reception Room, Edward and others of the elite. There are not many of them.

SELF-MADE MAN (*in a subdued tone*)

I 'spose it ain't etiquette to tell how much we paid for our seats?

MRS. GILDCREST

Decidedly not.

SELF-MADE MAN (*with a jerk of his thumb toward onlookers*)

I thought maybe they'd enjoy hearin' the figgers.

HIS WIFE

James!

SELF-MADE MAN

Well, why not? We're all rich, or we wouldn't be here. Why not let 'em know how rich we are! I ain't ashamed of my pile. Made it all myself, every penny of it. Self-made man, that's me. (*Looks about uneasily*) I'm mighty proud to be here. Proudest moment of my life. Hers, too. Yes, sir.

HIS WIFE (*nervously*)

James! (*To Flunkey serving food*) No, thank you. No more.

SELF-MADE MAN (*following wife's example*)

No more. (*To Richest Man*) Now take you. Nobody knows how much you're worth —

RICHEST MAN (*speaking slowly in a thin voice*)

I don't know myself. Long ago I lost interest in large sums of money. One doesn't see the millions, or feel them. That's why I give away

dimes. One can feel the bright, new dimes and see them glitter. (*To Valet who is standing behind his chair*) Give James a dime.

[*Valet does so.*

SELF-MADE MAN

Ha, ha! Thanks.

[*He subsides.*

CHIEF DEPUTY

It's all very well to encourage riches. But to advertise them — ah — especially on this occasion —

GILDCREST

You're quite right, sir.

[*They go on eating.*

HOSTESS OF RECEPTION ROOM

Last night I went to the play. (*To Mr. Gildcrest*) Have you noticed they've changed the ending?

MR. GILDCREST

Yes.

HOSTESS

Abominable, isn't it?

SEVERAL VOICES (*politely*)

Abominable.

AN ELDERLY MAN

There are too many innovations. It's bad for

the young. Now you take that scandal the other day. Some young woman running away from home and making a scene in chapel. Who was it — ?

HIS WIFE

Psst! (*Elderly man looks about the table, observes an embarrassment. The Gildcrests are frozen. Edward is agitated*) Oh! Oh, yes. Quite so, Hmm. Isn't it time for the speeches?

CHIEF DEPUTY

Ah, perhaps it is. (*He rises*) Fellow guests, as is our custom we will listen to a few remarks from our prominent — ah — guests. (*Glances at notes in his hand*) I will first call upon Mr. James Glutz. Ah — Mr. Glutz.

[*Self-made Man rises.*

SELF-MADE MAN (*very slowly*)

Mr. Chief Deputy, Ladies and Gentlemen. Well, I guess what's wanted on this occasion is common sense mixed in with a little hoakum.

HIS WIFE

James!

SELF-MADE MAN (*in a muffled voice*)

Don't worry, my dear. I ain't gonna try any of the hoakum. That takes education. I'm just

gonna say what's in my heart and soul and then set down.

GILDCREST

Bravo!

SELF-MADE MAN

To me this banquet means somethin'. Look at me! I came up from the bottom, I did. Don't that prove somethin'? Yes, sir. It proves that every man is born free and equal, and that brains count more'n birth. It proves that if you work hard and make money you can get to be where I am — right here at this table. At the top of the heap!

VOICES

Bravo! Bravo!

SELF-MADE MAN

Now here's the point, ladies and gentlemen. If there wasn't no Host at the head of the house, lookin' after things and runnin' the show, I wouldn't be here to-night. That's how I look at it. The Host sees to it that each and every one of us has our opportunity, only most people are too soft to take it. But I know it's true because I've proved it. (*Turning*) I don't ask who he is or what he is, the way some do. I know he's there because I'm here — and

that's all I want to know, Justice, opportunity, power — that's him! I thank you.

[*Prolonged applause.*

CHIEF DEPUTY

A most excellent speech. I will call upon my young colleague to respond to it.

YOUNG DEPUTY (*rises, in confusion*)

I beg to be excused, sir. I — I'm not well.

[*Sits down.*

CHIEF DEPUTY

My young colleague has been indisposed since his mission to the Basement the other day. His zeal is admirable but he has a delicate constitution. I will respond to our friend, Mr. Glutz, who, if I may say so, has sounded the keynote of our — ah — faith. (*With fervor*) My friends, this is an age of discontent. Unfortunately there has arisen in this house a strange and perverse pride, an intellectual impudence which dares to question the person of the Host himself.

MURMURS FROM THE GUESTS

No, No! Yes, it's true. Shocking!

CHIEF DEPUTY

We all have heard these mutterings. Some of us, in moments of weakness, have felt that the

foundations of this house were about to be shaken and the house to fall. (*He smiles*) My friends, these portents are but ripples troubling the surface of our life. Below that surface all is calm, serene; turn your eyes and gaze upon the Ark of the Host. Do you doubt his presence? No! He is as he has been from the beginning, and ever shall be — the Host upon whose face no living man has ever looked, nor can look! For to gaze upon that countenance, shining with the glory of a thousand suns, would be to blind and blast the very soul of man!

A CHILD'S VOICE (*from the crowd of onlookers*)

I want to see him! (*Dead silence*) I want to see the Host!

[*There is a slight confusion. Stressman raises his head. Guests at the table turn to look. The child is told to hush, etc.*

CHIEF DEPUTY

And so, my friends, I say — ah — Where was I?

YOUNG DEPUTY

You were blinding and blasting the soul of man, sir.

CHIEF DEPUTY

Ah, yes. To continue —

CHILD'S VOICE (*insistent*)

I want to see him.

VOICES FROM THE TABLE

Ssh! Shameful! Take the child out. Be silent.

CHILD'S VOICE (*grown shrill*)

I want to see —

CHIEF DEPUTY

Guards!

[*The two flunkeys attending the Ark descend the steps, advance toward child. Child's mother snatches him up in her arms.*

MOTHER (*angrily*)

Don't you touch him! You keep your hands off him. You —

CHIEF DEPUTY (*loudly*)

Do as I bid you! Remove that woman and her child!

YOUNG DEPUTY (*springing to his feet*)

No! I must speak! (*All turn to look at him*) This child, sir, has voiced the desire, the demand of the age. Even I — a deputy — have not been insensible to that demand. The other day, coming up from the Basement, I felt it gathering in my breast, in my throat, choking me. (*He puts his hands to his throat*) I must know! I, too, want to see the Host!

[*There is a sudden burst of applause from the spectators. They press forward, curious.*

CHIEF DEPUTY (*to Young Deputy*)

Sit down, sir! And be quiet! I'll deal with you later. (*To the crowd*) Quiet! In the name of the Host, be still!

[*They fall back and are silent. The Young Deputy has sunk down into his chair, exhausted. One man remains standing near the table. He is Stressman.*

STRESSMAN

Do you know me?

CHIEF DEPUTY

I do not! And I've no desire —

STRESSMAN

I'm the man who made a disturbance in Chapel —

CHIEF DEPUTY

Ah, yes! I know you now. Blasphemer! Why have you come here —

STRESSMAN

To finish the disturbance.

CHIEF DEPUTY

Guards!

[*The guards advance toward him.*

STRESSMAN

One moment. Is the Host so feeble that he has to depend for argument on two flunkeys in uniform?

CHIEF DEPUTY (*waving back the guards*)

Wait! I'll answer this man. Now, sir. Speak.

STRESSMAN

I've only this to say; and I say it now without anger, without resentment, without hope. We've been living in a house of mystery. Let us, out of respect for ourselves, tear down the curtains from the Ark and know what power rules this house.

CHIEF DEPUTY

It would mean death!

STRESSMAN

Since when have men been afraid to die? (*Slaps his pocket*) I've got death in my pocket. I'll gamble it against whatever power exists behind those curtains.

CHIEF DEPUTY

You're mad!

[[*Laura, breaking from the crowd, runs swiftly up the steps and tears down the curtains of the Ark. A Skeleton is seen seated on a golden throne.*

LAURA (*cries out*)

Look!

[*There is a low moan, a sudden piercing scream. The Richest Man leaps to his feet, laughing and shouting.*

RICHEST MAN

Give him a dime! Give him a dime! Give him a—

[*He falls face downward over the table.*

Again silence. The Chief Deputy stands as if frozen. The others remain in twisted attitudes staring up at the Ark. Then the whisper begins.

SELF-MADE MAN (*hoarsely*)

The Host is a skeleton.

MRS. GILDCREST

The Host is a skeleton.

GILDCREST

The Host is a skeleton.

OTHERS AT TABLE

The Host is a skeleton. The Host is a skeleton.

[*The crowd takes it up.*

VOICES IN THE CROWD

The Host is a skeleton! The Host is a skeleton!
The Host is a skeleton!

A MAN (*runs out into the corridor*)

The Host is a skeleton!

[*One or two others follow him. The cry is heard*

through the house. It dies out and is followed by a heavy silence.

SELF-MADE MAN (*pointing to Richest Man*)

He's dead. He just gave me a dime, didn't he? What was it all for? This table, (*to his wife*) your clothes, my success. Robbing corpses; let's go back to robbing corpses.

[*He approaches Richest Man, bends over him as if to rifle his pockets, suddenly slumps back into his chair.*

A new sound has begun. Faintly one hears it.

Bum, bum, bumity-bum!

Bum, bum, bumity-bum!

[*It grows louder. It becomes a song. There is a tin pan in it being used as a drum.*

CHIEF DEPUTY (*afraid at last*)

What's that?

STRESSMAN

The new rhythm! Now you'll feel it, now the storm breaks — !

[*He sees Laura standing on the steps and mounts to her with a cry.*

Laura!

MRS. GILDCREST (*rises; holds out her arms*)

You! My daughter! You — !

EDWARD

So it's over. You've destroyed the illusion. Permit me — ! *(He seizes knife from table; stabs himself)* One prefers — I beg your pardon — the illusion —

[He dies.

Song grows thunderous. It is at the door. The Basement people burst in, led by the Negro and the Idiot, beating his tin pan.

BASEMENT PEOPLE *(singing)*

Bum, bum, bumity-bum!
Bum, bum, bumity-bum!

[The Drunken Man drags in the Mad Musician who strikes an accompaniment on the bars of his cage. The Four Blind Singers enter, clinging to one another's hands.

DOORMAN *(forced backward by the crowd)*

You can't come in! You aren't dressed for it!

[They hurl him aside.

YOUNG DEPUTY *(jumping to his feet)*

No, no! Go back! *(Screaming)* I repent, I repent —

[The Negro has reached him. He seizes the Young Deputy and twists his neck, tossing him across the table.

Instantly there is chaos. The Four Blind Singers

go on with the song, but the others break into shouting. They rush toward the table, the guests flee, the onlookers join one group or the other. The Chief Deputy runs up the steps and down again. The Negro howls with laughter. The Dope Fiend is seen leaning against the proscenium.

Finally the scene resolves itself, only the Basement people are left, and on the steps Laura and Stressman

NEGRO (*catches sight of Skeleton*)

Yondah! Looky yondah! Bones! Th'ow out de ole bones. I wants to sit in de golden chair.

[*He runs up the steps.*

Stressman confronts him. He stops. They look at each other.

STRESSMAN

Well? Are you going to twist my neck?

LAURA

No, no — !

NEGRO (*scowling*)

Mebbe I is. Who is you?

DRUNKEN MAN (*at foot of steps*)

Why, it's his honor, the poet! The gentleman who taught us to sing.

[*A murmur of recognition from the crowd.*

A VOICE

He ain't one of us. Twist his neck, Nigger!

LAURA

No, take me. I'm an aristocrat. Twist my neck. See how white it is?

[*The Negro's hands go toward her throat.*

STRESSMAN (*pushing her back*)

Be quiet. Have you forgotten that we were to die together? (*To the crowd*) I'm not going to beg for my life. It's yours. Only give me a moment. I'll save you the trouble — (*To Laura*) Now?

LAURA

Yes, now!

[*Stressman draws his revolver.*

DOPE FIEND (*speaking suddenly*)

Witness, my brothers, the miracle of love! Love that is not afraid, love that runs like a bright thread through a dingy tapestry! Let them go. Out of chaos this one harmony survives! Let them go!

CROWD

That's right. Let 'em go. Stand back, Nigger!

[*The Negro moves aside.*

DRUNKEN MAN (*to Stressman*)

A benediction, sir! A benediction! Ask a

blessing on us climbing out of blood and chaos toward the stars. Kneel, my brothers! Kneel and listen! (*Again to Stressman*) Your blessing, sir.

[*The crowd is on its knees. The Negro stares, stupidly about him, then also kneels.*

STRESSMAN (*speaking in a deep silence*)

The fruits of human victory are yours. They are violence, ignorance, failure. (*A pause*) The blessing of all futility be upon you, now and evermore.

[*He and Laura go out through one of the doors at the top of the steps.*

The Crowd still kneels, dazed. Then a woman rises, snatches up a cake from the table.

WOMAN (*shrieking*)

Cake! They've got cake!

[*The crowd jumps up.*

VOICES

Cake! Cake! Cake! Cake!

[*The Woman runs about the table. The others pursue her, shouting. They lose all sense of purpose; they run in a wide heedless circle. Even the Mad Musician in his cage and the Four Blind Singers are drawn into it. The Dope Fiend seizes one of the lighted candelabra and*

rushes out into the corridor with it. The Negro, alone, mounts the steps to the Ark, hurls down the Skeleton and seating himself in the golden chair, bursts into wild laughter.

CURTAIN

Scene V

A Garden. A single tree holding red apples against the sky. A broken wall, rear. An old well-head, the stones laid up without mortar, forward, left. The prospect beyond the wall is unbroken.

A dull red glare in the distance. Laura and Stressman come in through the broken wall. Her dress is torn, her hair is down. They are tired from walking.

LAURA (*looking about in wonder*)
It's a sort of garden.

STRESSMAN
We ought to find water here. Yes, here's a well. Dry? (*He peers in*) No! (*To Laura*) Water!

LAURA (*with a long sigh*)
Oh — (*She drops down beside him; peers in*) How cool!

STRESSMAN
Here's an old stone vessel — a cup.
[*He shows it to her.*

LAURA
Some one's been here before us.

STRESSMAN

It must be an old well. There's no mortar between these stones.

[He scoops up a cupful of water, gives her to drink.

LAURA

Ah — That's good! I've never been so thirsty before. I've never been thirsty —

STRESSMAN (*drinks. Spills a few drops on the ground.*)

A little for the thirsty ground. Ha, ha! How clean the air is! Have you noticed?

LAURA

Yes. *[She pushes back her hair.*

A silence.

STRESSMAN

What are you thinking of?

LAURA

Of them.

STRESSMAN

That's past. Done with. You know what that light means?

LAURA

It followed us all night.

STRESSMAN

It showed us our way.

LAURA

Yes, it is done. I shall put it out of my mind. (*Turning to him*) Was it a dream?

STRESSMAN

No, it was real. Only reality could have come to such an end.

LAURA

To such a beginning.

STRESSMAN

My dear —

LAURA

Why did you ask that blessing on them? Poor creatures — !

STRESSMAN

It was a blessing on myself for my blindness and my failure. Because I saw, in all that violence, a certain truth: that no achievement is possible except what brings one's self into contact with the beauty and the wonder of the world.

LAURA

There's a great wonder here —

STRESSMAN

Yes. (*Pointing*) Look at that rabbit crouching by the wall. See him go! There's achievement for you.

LAURA

How are we going to live?

STRESSMAN

After I've rested, I'll build you a shelter from the rain. I'll sit in the doorway and make poems for you, whatever comes into my head Here's water, and there's fruit on that tree. (*He pauses; looks around*) Why, it's the still place.

LAURA

It is still.

STRESSMAN

Look at that cloud! At night I'll reach up and draw it down for your cover —

LAURA

We can go naked here. (*Facing him*) I must tell you, Stressman, that night in my room, I was ashamed. Now I want you to see me, and I to see you, naked and —

STRESSMAN

And unashamed.

LAURA

Quite unashamed.

[*He takes her in his arms; kisses her.*

STRESSMAN

Perhaps there's a Gardener.

The Gardener appears. He is an old man with a long, white beard. He wears a single garment, bound with a cord at the waist, and sandals. He carries a staff.

GARDENER

Welcome!

LAURA

You're the — ?

GARDENER

I am the Gardener.

STRESSMAN

We've come a long way. May we stay here and rest a while?

GARDENER

Have I not said Welcome?

STRESSMAN

Thank you.

GARDENER (*with a certain eagerness*)

Perhaps you can tell me — That light in the west? What is it?

STRESSMAN

The House. They've burned it.

GARDENER

At last. I'm glad. It was all a mistake, you know. A great mistake. (*He smiles*) I'm glad you've come back.

LAURA

But we've never been here before!

GARDENER

It was all a mistake. My fault! I was younger then and more impetuous — (*To Laura*) You're not so beautiful as you were then. Still, there's a great beauty to be accomplished in you.

LAURA (*to Stressman*)

What does he mean?

GARDENER

You were only hungry — weren't you? — when you stole the fruit from the tree? Ah, yes! I'm older now, and wiser. I understand. It was a mistake. They were afraid, you see. After I had driven them out they were afraid, and they built a house in which to hide from me. They asked me to play their Host, so strange and contradictory was their fear. But I refused. I am a gardener. So they had another in my place. I don't know who. Some one. (*Stressman looks at Laura; taps his forehead*) I am a gardener.

STRESSMAN

You've done well with this tree.

GARDENER

Sometimes I wish I had stopped at trees. I've

been a long time cultivating this one. See how fine the fruit is. So rich and red!

LAURA

We thought we might live here.

STRESSMAN

Would you mind if I built a shelter?

GARDENER

If you like. But build no higher than your own head. If you start a house here, you must go. Do you understand? No houses.

LAURA

What else instead?

GARDENER

You two are lovers? You have an honest passion for each other?

LAURA

I love him.

GARDENER (*to Stressman*)

Take her in your arms. (*He does so*) Behold, I have given you this dwelling. Keep it beautiful — for me. (*They look at him*) The body is your house, and the soul is the strangeness of it.

LAURA

You're right, old man! How simple it is, and yet — how it lights one's mind! (*To Stressman*) It will be better than the other —

STRESSMAN

Much better.

LAURA

I'm no longer thirsty. I'm hungry.

GARDENER

Hungry? Of course you are. (*He goes toward tree*) There shall be no unsatisfied hunger here. [*He picks an apple from the tree.*

STRESSMAN (*to Laura*)

The cloud, the rabbit, a little shelter from the rain — I will make you poems, I'll cry them into the wind —

LAURA

It will happen now!

STRESSMAN

What?

LAURA

The miracle —

GARDENER (*approaching them*)

You've been gone a long time. I'm glad you've come back. It was all a mistake. (*With that infinite sweetness sometimes present in very old men*) Here. Have an apple!

CURTAIN

200
38+
41/25